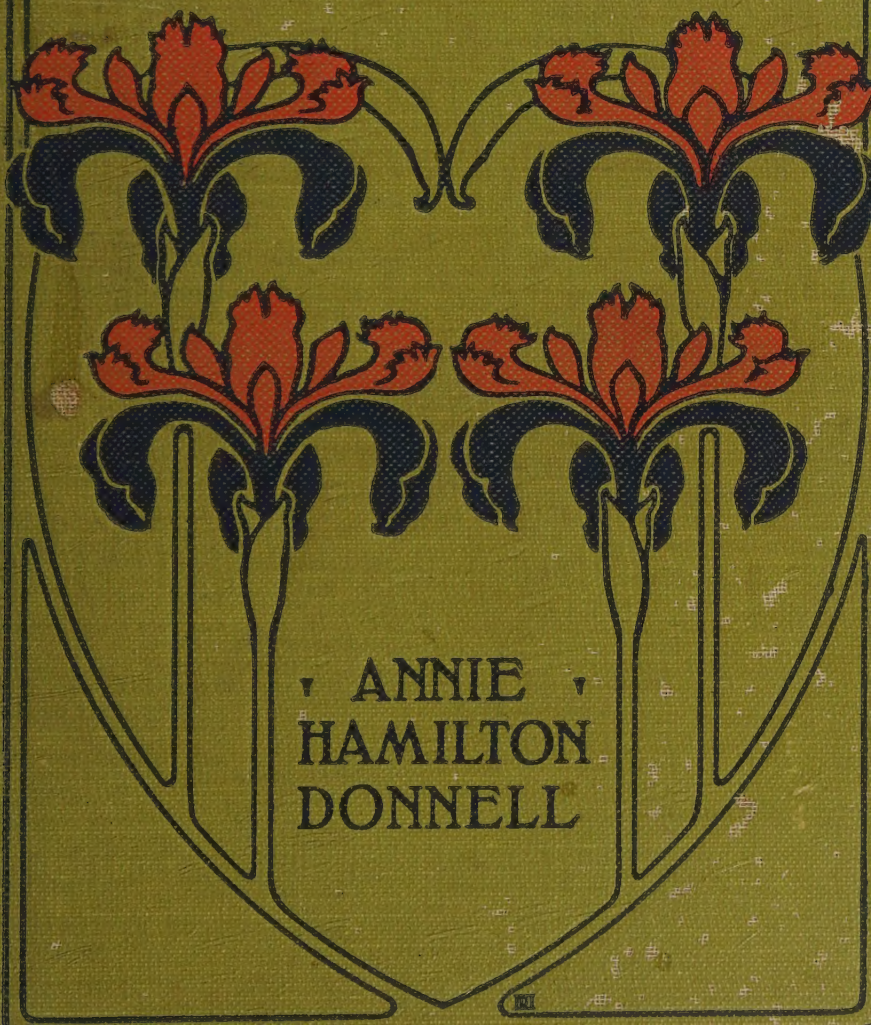
MISS THEODOSIA'S HEARTSTRINGS



ANNIE HAMILTON DONNELL

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Slowly her delicate fingers undid the ravages of Stefana's patient endeavors. FRONTISPIECE. *See page* 32.

Miss Theodosia's Heartstrings

BY

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WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY

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To MY HUSBAND

WHO COULD WRITE SO MUCH
BETTER A BOOK AND
DEDICATE IT TO
ME!

ILLUSTRATIONS

Slowly her delicate fingers undid the ravages of Stefana's patient endeavors..... *Frontispiece*

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Miss Theodosia's Heartstrings

CHAPTER I

"MERCY gracious!"

"Well!"

The last utterance was Miss Theodosia Baxter's. She was a woman of few words at all times where few sufficed. One sufficed now. The child on her front porch, with a still childlier child on the small area of her knees, was not a creature of few words, but now extreme surprise limited speech. She was stricken with brevity,—stricken is the word — to match Miss Theodosia's.

Downward, upward, each gazed into the other's surprised face. The childlier child, jouncing pleasantly back and forth, viewed them both impartially.

It was the child who regarded the situation, after a moment of mental adjustment, as humorous. She giggled softly.

"Mercy gracious! How you surprised me' 'n' Elly Precious, an' me 'n' Elly Precious surprised you! I don't know which was the whichest! We came over to be shady just once more. We didn't s'pose you would come home till to-morrow, did we, Elly Precious?"

"I came last night," Miss Theodosia replied with crispness. She stood in her doorway, apparently waiting for something which — apparently — was not to happen. The child and Elly Precious sat on in seeming calm.

"Yes'm. Of course if you hadn't come, you wouldn't be standin' there lookin' at Elly Precious — isn't he a darlin' dear? Wouldn't you like to look at his toes?"

It was Miss Theodosia Baxter's turn to say "Mercy gracious!" but she did not say it aloud. It was her turn, too, to see a bit of humor in the situation on her front porch.

"Not — just now," she said rather hastily. She could not remember ever to have seen a baby's toes. "I've no doubt they

are — are excellent toes." The word did not satisfy her, but the suitable adjective was not at hand.

"Mercy gracious! That's a funny way to talk about toes! Elly Precious's are pink as anything — an' six — yes'm! I've made consid'able money out of his toes. Yes," with rising pride at the sight of Miss Theodosia's surprise, "'leven cents, so far. I only charged Lelia Fling a cent for two looks, because Lelia's baby's dead. I've got three cents out o' her; she says five of Elly Precious's remind her of her baby's toes. Isn't it funny you can't make boys pay to look at babies' toes, even when they's such a lot? Only just girls. Stefana says it's because girls are ungrown-up mothers. Mercy gracious! speakin' of Stefana an' mothers, reminds me —"

The shrill little voice stopped with a suddenness that made the woman in the door fear for Elly Precious; it seemed that he must be jolted from his narrow perch.

Miss Theodosia had wandered up and down the world for three years in search

of something to interest her, only to come home and find it here upon the upper step of her own front porch. She stepped from the doorway and sat down in one of the wicker rockers. She had plenty of time to be interested; there was really no haste for unpacking and settling back into her little country rut.

"What about 'Stefana and mothers'?" she prodded gently. A cloud had settled on the child's vivid little face and threatened to overshade the childlier child, as well. "I suppose 'Stefana' is a Spanish person, isn't she?" The name had a definitely foreign sound.

"Oh, no'm—just a United States. We're all United States. Mother named her; we've all got beautiful names, except poor Elly. Mother hated to call him Elihu, but there was Grandfather gettin' older an' older all the time, an' she dassen't wait till the next one. She put it off an' off with the other boys, Carruthers an' Gilpatrick —he's dead. She just couldn't name any of 'm Elihu, till Grandfather scared her,

gettin' so old. She was afraid there wouldn't be time, an' there wasn't any to spare. Grandfather's dead now — she's thankful enough she didn't wait any longer. He was so pleased. He said he could depart this life easier, leavin' an Elihu Flagg behind him. An', anyway, Mother says Elly can call himself his middle name, if he'd ruther, when he's twenty-one — his middle name's Launcelot."

Elihu Launcelot, at this juncture, toppled over against the little flat breast of his nurse, asleep — or in a swoon; Miss Theodosia had her fears. There seemed sufficient swooning cause.

"Stefana," she prompted again, her interest advancing at a rapid pace, "and mothers —"

"Stefana's our oldest. She's goin' to run us while Mother's away. She's got a job before her! All I can do is 'tend Elly Precious — we're all boys, but us. But, of course, runnin' the family isn't the real trouble — not what made Mother cry."

Miss Theodosia sat forward in her chair.

"What made Mother cry?" she asked. The child shifted her heavy burden the better to turn her head. She regarded the beautiful white lady gloomily.

"You," she stated briefly.

This time Miss Theodosia said it aloud and with a surprising ease, as if of long custom — "Mercy gracious!"

"Oh, I didn't mean you're to blame; you can't help Aunt Sarah tumblin' down the cellar stairs an' Mother not bein' able to do you up."

"Do me — up?"

"Yes'm — white-wash you. Mother was sure you'd let her, an' we were goin' to send Carruthers to a deaf 'n' dumb school after you'd wore white clo'es enough. He isn't dumb, but he's deaf. He can't hear Elly Precious laugh — only yell. Mother heard that you always wore white dresses an' she most hugged herself — she hugged us. She said you'd prob'ly find out what a good white-washer she was an' let her white-wash you. But, now, Aunt Sarah's went an' fell down cellar."

"Whitewash — whitewash?" queried Miss Theodosia.

"Yes'm, you didn't think Mother was a washwoman, did you? Of course she could, but it doesn't pay 's well. She only whitewashes — white clo'es, you know, dresses an' shirtwaists. She says it's her talent that the Lord's gave her, an' she's goin' to make it gain ten talents for Carruthers. But Aunt Sarah —"

"Never mind Aunt Sarah. Unless — do you mean your mother has had to go away from home?"

"Yes'm, to see to Aunt Sarah. They were twins when they were babies. Mother cried, because she said of course you'd have to be done up while she was gone, an' so she'd lost you. She said you'd been her bacon light ever since she heard you was comin' home an' wore so many white clo'es."

The garrulous little voice might have run on indefinitely but for the abrupt appearance, here, of a slender girl in an all-enwrapping gingham apron. She came hurrying up Miss Theodosia's front walk.

"Well, Evangeline Flagg, I hope you're blushing crimson scarlet red — helping yourself to folks's doorsteps that's got back from Europe! I hope —" but the newcomer got no further, for, quite suddenly, she found herself blushing crimson scarlet red, in the grip of a disconcerting thought.

"I suppose it's just as bad to help yourself to doorsteps when folks aren't here as when they are," she said slowly, "but you mustn't blame Mother. She'd never've allowed Evangeline and Elly, if we'd had a single sol-i-ta-ry tree. Or been on the shady side. Or had a porch. Elly's been pindly, and Mother felt obliged to save his life. It's been terribly hot. Here, Evangeline Flagg, you give Elly here, an' you run home an' keep the soup-kettle from burning on. Don't you wait until it smells! I've got an errand to do here."

The child, Evangeline, relinquished her burden and turned slowly away. But she halted at the foot of the steps.

"This is Stefana," she introduced politely. "Stefana, you ain't *goin' to?* You

"We've all got beautiful names except poor Elly."
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look 'xactly as if you was. Mercy gracious!"

"Yes," Stefana returned gravely, "I am. Now, you go. Remember the soup!"

Miss Theodosia's interested gaze left the retreating little figure and came back to Stefana and Elly Precious. She was pleasantly aware of her own immaculate daintiness in her crisp white dress. Only Theodosia Baxter would have dreamed of arraying herself in white to unpack and settle. Her friends declared she made a fetich of her white raiment; it was a well-known fact among them that she was extremely "fussy" about its laundering.

"One, two, three," counted the slender girl, over the baby's bald little head, "only three tucks, an' the lace not terribly full on the edges. I'm thankful there aren't any ruffles, but, there, I suppose there are on some o' the others, aren't there? I'll have to manage the ruffles. I mean, if — oh, I mean, won't you please let me do you up? Just till Aunt Sarah's bone knits — so to save you for Mother? I'll try so

hard! If I don't, Charlotte Lovell will — she's the only other one. She's a beautiful washer and ironer, but none of her children are deaf, and she hasn't any, anyway. I didn't dare to come over and ask you, but I kept thinking of poor Mother and how she's been 'lotting on earning all that money. There, I've asked you — please don't answer till I've counted ten. When we were little, Mother always said for us to; it was safer. One, two, three — " she counted rapidly, then swung about facing Miss Theodosia. "You can say 'no,' now," she said, with a difficult little smile.

Miss Theodosia had been, in a way, counting ten herself. She had had time to remember her very strict injunctions to those to whom she entrusted her beloved white gowns — to pull out the lace with careful fingers, not to iron it; to iron embroidered portions over many thicknesses of flannel, and never, never, never on the right side; to starch the dresses just enough and not too much. All these thoughts flashed through her mind while Stefana

counted ten. But it was without accompaniment of injunctions that Miss Theodosia answered on that wistful little stroke of ten. In her soul she felt the futility of injunctions.

"Yes," answered Miss Theodosia.

Stefana whirled, at the risk of Elihu Launcelot.

"Oh — oh, what? You mean I can do you up, honest? Starch you, and iron you, too — of course, I could wash you. Oh, if I could drop Elly Precious I'd get right up and dance!"

"Give Elly Precious to me, and go ahead, my dear," said the White Lady with a smile.

But Stefana shook her head. She was covertly studying the white dress once more. It was very white — she could detect no promising spots or creases, and she drew a sigh even in the midst of her rejoicing. If a person only sat on porches, in chairs, how often did white dresses need doing up? Miss Theodosia interpreted the sigh and look.

"Oh, I've three of them rolled up in my trunk; aren't three enough to begin on? And shirtwaists — I'm sure I don't know how many of those. I'll go and get them now."

In the hall she stopped at the mirror, jibing at the image confronting her. "You've done it this time, Theodosia Baxter! When you can't bear a wrinkle! But, there, don't look so scared — daughters inherit their mothers' talents, plenty of times. And you need only try it once, of course."

After Stefana had gone away, doubly laden with clothes and bulky baby, Miss Theodosia remained on her porch. She found herself leaning over and parting her porch-vines, to get a glimpse of the little house next door. She had always loathed that little house with its barefaced poverties and uglinesses, and it had been a great relief to her to have it stand vacant in past years. She had left it vacant when she started upon her last globe-trotting. Now here it was teeming with life, and here she

was aiding and abetting it! What new manner of Theodosia Baxter was this?

"You'd better get up and globe-trot again, Woman, and not unpack," she uttered, with a lone woman's habit of talking to herself. "You were never made to live in a house like other people — to sit on porches and rock. And certainly, Theodosia Baxter, you were never made to live next to that little dry-goods box. It will turn you gray, poor thing." She felt a gentle pity for herself, then gentle wrath seized her. Why had she come home, anyway? Already she was lonely and restless. Why — could anybody tell her why — had she weakly yielded to two small girls? Her dear-beloved white dresses! And she could not go back on her promise — not on a Baxter promise! There was, indeed, the release of going away again, back to her globe-trotting —

"I might write to Cornelia Dunlap," Miss Theodosia thought. "Maybe she is sorry she came home, too."

Cornelia Dunlap had been her recent

comrade of the road. They had traveled to many far places together. What would Cornelia say to that little conference of three — and a baby — on the front porch?

"My dear," wrote Miss Theodosia, "you will think I have been swapped in my cradle since I left you! 'That is no fellow tramp of mine,' you will say, 'That woman being victimized by children in knee-high dresses! Theodosia Baxter nothing!'" — for Cornelia Dunlap in moments of surprise resorted sometimes to slang, which she claimed was a sturdy vehicle of speech. "You will set down your teacup hard," wrote on Miss Theodosia, — "I know you are drinking tea! — when I tell you the little story of the Whitewashing of Theodosia Baxter. But shall I tell it? Why expose Theodosia Baxter's weaknesses when hitherto she has posed as strong? Soberly, Cornelia, I am as much surprised at myself as you will be (oh, I shall tell it!). Do you remember your Mother Goose? The little astonished old lady who took a nap beside the road and woke to find her pet-

ticoats cut off at her knees? 'Oh, lawk-a-daisy me, can this be I!' cried she. I'm not sure those were just her words, but they will do. Oh, lawk-a-daisy me, can this be Theodosia Baxter! The Astonished Little Old Lady, if I remember my Mother Goose, resorted to the simple expedient of going home and letting her little dog decide if she were she. But I have no little dog.

"They were so earnest to whitewash me, Cornelia! The whole scheme was such a plucky little one and Baxters, from the dawn of creation, have admired pluck. The lively, chatterbox-one was 'Evangeline' and the quiet one who should have been an Evangeline was what the other one ought to have been, — a 'Stefana,' suggestive of flashing, dark eyes under a lace mantilla, with ways to match the eyes. So does fate play her little jokes. The baby — but what do I know of babies or you know of babies? He had six toes and I might have seen them for nothing; so do we miss our opportunities. He was named for his

grandfather just in time, but the name, my dear, the name! Elihu. Are you listening? *Elihu!* But they offered him the assuaging 'sop' of 'Launcelot' for a middle name, and what could a baby do? Babies are the little scapegoats of mistaken loyalties."

Miss Theodosia was having a good time. Her sober mood had passed. She wrote on enjoyingly, describing the whole little episode to Cornelia Dunlap. The freshening of it in her memory was pleasant. Again she felt the tug of those eager little pleadings. She kept remembering other things about little Elihu Launcelot besides his name and his toes. She remembered how gravely he had looked at her, how tiny and soft his hands were.

"That little box of a house next to mine, Cornelia, — I told you about it. Well, it's as full now as it has been empty, and a little fuller. Dear knows how many it holds! But it's sociable seeing the smoke come out of the chimney; it's *friendly*."

She had not thought of it as sociable and friendly before. The thought seemed

just to have come to her. She was quite cheerful-minded when she finished her letter to Cornelia Dunlap and neatly folded it. If she had but known, she was sorry for Cornelia who was not next door to a friendly little box.

She made tea and sipped it, made golden toast and opened a foreign-looking box of some sort of jelly. While she ate slowly, she slowly made plans. No, she would not have a stay-all-the-time maid — yes, she would move her things into the room facing the next-door house. Until she got tired of watching the sociable thread of smoke, anyway.

It had not occurred yet to Theodosia Baxter that she had not said a word to Cornelia Dunlap about going on their travels again. When it did occur, she suddenly laughed out aloud, but softly.

"I forgot what I began that letter *for!* I never mentioned going away again! And now — I'm glad. Who wants to go off? 'East, west, hame's best.' Even a hame next door to a little dry-goods box."

Of course there was the promise to let those funny kiddies whitewash her —

"It's a Baxter promise; don't try to get out of it, Theodosia Baxter," she said.

The next noon she saw her dresses dangling from the neighboring clothesline. They were not successfully dangled; Miss Theodosia liked to see them hung with symmetry, all alike in a seemly row. The shirtwaists dangled also in unseemly attitudes. One hung by a single sleeve. But that was not all — a certain faint suggestion of something worse than lack of symmetry persisted in Miss Theodosia's mind. They had been especially travel-stained, soiled; they had still an air of soil and travel-stain. They didn't look clean!

Miss Theodosia groaned. "It may be blueing streaks," she said, but there was little comfort in blueing streaks. She got her opera glasses and peered through them at her beloved dresses. Brought up at close range, they were certainly blue-streaked, and there was plain lack of the snowy whiteness her stern washing-creed demanded.

At intervals, small figures issued from the house and circled about the clotheslines, inspecting their contents critically. Miss Theodosia saw one of them — it was the child of her doorstep — lay questionable hold (it must be questionable!) upon a delicate garment and examine a portion of it excitedly. She saw the child dart back to the house and again issue forth, dragging the slender young washerwoman. Together they examined. Miss Theodosia caught up her glasses and brought the little pair into the near field of her vision; she saw both anxious young faces. The face of Stefana was strained and careworn.

Miss Theodosia was thirty-six years old, and all of the years had been comfortable, carefree ones. In the natural order of her pleasantly migratory, luxurious life, she had rarely come into close contact with careworn or strained faces; this contact through the small, clear lenses seemed startlingly close. Stefana's lean and anxious face, the child's baby-bent little back, like the back of an old woman — it was at

these Miss Theodosia looked through her pearl glasses. She forgot to look at the garment the children examined so troubledly. Suddenly, Miss Theodosia Baxter — traveler, fortune-favored one — found herself as anxious for the success of Stefana's stout little project as the two young people within her field of view, but, suddenly and unaccountably, from a new motive. The slim, worn-looking little creature, — and that tinier, tired little creature — must not fail! The stout project should succeed!

Stefana carried the disputed garment back into the house and rewashed it; it was dripping wet when she again dangled it beside the others. Several times during the afternoon this process was repeated, until, at nightfall, the entire wash dripped, rewashed and soggy. Miss Theodosia nodded her head approvingly; she had her reasons for being glad that the wash was to remain out overnight.

It was a starless, moonless night — a night to prowl successfully about clotheslines.

Miss Theodosia prowled. The little dry-goods box full of children was a small, vague blur, a little darker than the darkness. The children slept the profound sleep of childhood and childhood's unbelonging toil. Sleep was smoothing Stefana's roughened little nerves with gentle hand and fortifying her courage for yet more strenuous toils to come. Evangeline's weary little arm — and tongue — were resting.

Miss Theodosia prowled softly, to avoid disturbing the little box-house. She had the guilty conscience of the prowler that sent her heart into her mouth at the crackling of a twig under her feet. She found herself listening, holding her breath in a small panic. No sound of wakened sleepers, but there must be no more twigs.

"I must add a postscript to Cornelia Dunlap's letter," she thought. "This would make a thrilling wind-up! Cornelia would say, 'Lawk-a-daisy me, it *can't* be Theodosia Baxter!' She wouldn't need any little dog."

Safe in her own house once more, Miss Theodosia breathed a sigh of relief. Saved! But there was another trip yet to be made to that region behind the vague little blur of a box. It was too soon to be relieved.

"What I've done once I can do twice," boasted Miss Theodosia, undaunted, though at the approach of her second prowling expedition, her courage waned unexpectedly. "I mean if I have a cup of tea — strong," she weakly appended to her boast. It would take her longer out there the second time. She really needed tea.

Miss Theodosia retired at eleven, tired but contented. She even smiled at her sodden fingers — when had Miss Theodosia Baxter's fingers been sodden before!

The next morning, the child and the childlier child appeared at her porch, where she rocked contentedly.

"She's ironin' 'em! — Stefana's ironin' 'em! No, I can't sit down; she said not to. She's ironed one dress three times. It's

funny how irons stick, isn't it? No, not funny — mercy gracious! You oughter see Stefana's cheeks, an' she's burnt both thumbs — I'm keepin' Elly Precious out o' the way, an' she's forbid Carruthers comin' in a step. She'll get 'em ironed, Stefana will. You can't discourage Stefana! Last night I kind of thought you could, but the clo'es whitened out beautiful in the night. Stefana said it was the night air. There wasn't a single streak left this mornin'. We're goin' to keep your money in Mother's weddin' sugar-bowl, an' when she comes back, we're goin' to ask her if she don't want some sugar!"

All day Stefana toiled and retoiled. It was night when she sent one of the children to Miss Theodosia with her day's work. The one who came was Carruthers, chatty and deaf. Miss Theodosia did not have to do any talking.

"Stefana says there's some smooches, but the worst ones come under your arms an' where they's puckers. The wrinkles Stefana hopes you'll excuse — they'll air out,

she expects. She was comin' over an' explain, herself, but she's gone to bed. Evangeline's gone, too, to keep the baby quiet. Stefana says you needn't pay as much's you expected to, 'count o' the smooches an' wrink—"

"I always pay the same price for my dresses," Miss Theodosia said, forgetful of the boy's affliction. She put the money into the hard little palm of Carruthers and watched him scamper home with it. Miss Theodosia looked happy. She felt pleasant little tweaks at her heartstrings as if small grimy hands were ringing them, playing a tender little tune. Scorched, blundering young hands — Stefana's. The little tune rang plaintive in her ears. She had a vision of Stefana toiling over the ironing of her dresses and going to bed exhausted, when the toil was over. Miss Theodosia's eyes followed Carruther's retreating little figure till it reached the House of Little Children and disappeared from view. What had she, Theodosia Baxter, to do with houses of little children? Since when had they pos-

sessed attractions for her — held her tender, brooding gaze? What was she doing here now, gazing? Theodosia Baxter!

Stefana had folded the dresses painstakingly in separate newspaper bundles and stacked them on Carruther's outstretched arms. They were stacked now on Miss Theodosia's porch. She picked them up and turned with them into the house.

"I'll unfold them," she thought, "and shake them out. I must tell her to send them home without folding next time — or I can go and get them myself."

Unpinning Stefana's many pins, she lifted out one of the dresses. It creaked starchily under her hands; it opened out before Miss Theodosia's horrified vision. She uttered a groan.

Where, now, was that tender little heartstring tune?

CHAPTER II

MISS THEODOSIA saw pink. Near-anger surged up within her at this ruinous, this piteous result of Stefana's toil. The result dangled creaksomely from her hands, revealing new wrinkles and smooches and leprous patches of starch at every motion. What was in this bundle would be in the rest — there was no hope.

In Theodosia Baxter's little girlhood, she had played there were two "'Dosies," a good one and a bad one. The Good 'Dosie was often away from home, but was sometimes apt to appear at unexpected moments, to the embarrassment of the Bad 'Dosie. Stamp her foot as she would, Bad 'Dosie could not always drive the unwelcome intruder away.

"I don't like her!" the small sinner had once been heard to say. "She — she p'eaches at me!"

The Good 'Dosie was preaching now.

"Wait! Count ten!" she preached. "Don't get any angrier, or you'll see red instead of pink. Think of that poor child's burned thumbs — think of her having to take to her bed when she got through —"

"I don't wonder!" snapped Bad 'Dosie.

"Wait — wait! Aren't you going to be good? Do you remember what you used to do, to help out? Well?"

Miss Theodosia dropped the starchy mass on top of the other newspaper bundles and rather suddenly sat down in a chair. She saw a little child, preached to and penitent, on her knees, with folded hands, saying "Now I lame me down to sleep."

It was very still in the room. Miss Theodosia's eyes closed and opened again. It was as if she had said "Now I lame me." A little smile tugged at the corners of her mouth. She no longer saw even pink.

She got up briskly and began turning back her cuffs. First, she would build the kitchen fire; it must roar and snap, with all the work it had to do to-night. She

would heat a lot of water, for only boiling water could take out Stefana's awful starch. While the water was heating, she would eat her supper.

"A good, big supper, it will have to be," smiled this gentled Miss Theodosia. "I've got to get up my strength! No tea-and-toast-and-jam supper to-night." She heated her gridiron smoking hot and broiled a bit of steak. She tossed together little feathery biscuit and made coffee, fragrant and strong. Momently, Miss Theodosia's strength "got up." She moved about the kitchen briskly — when had she launched out upon a night's work like this? Adventure! — call it adventure.

Work to Miss Theodosia had always meant something that other people did, — the Stefanas and their mothers and brothers and fathers. What she herself did, a gentle, dilatory playing at work, hardly merited the name. A bit of dusting, tea-and-toasting, making her own bed, cooking for sheer love of cooking, what did they count in Miss Theodosia's summing up of tasks?

Always there had been some one to do her heavy things. She had put her washings out and taken her dinners in; three times a week she was swept and scrubbed and made immaculate.

But to-night — to-night was different. This was to be no playing at work. Miss Theodosia rose to the occasion gallantly — indeed, exultantly. Thrills of enthusiasm ran up, ran down her spine. She prepared for a night of it.

The dresses immersed in steaming hot water and her supper eaten, she stretched drying-lines, with considerable difficulty, from corner to corner of her kitchen, prepared an ironing-board, and got out long-idle irons. At eight o'clock she stopped for breath. Stefana's starch still resisted all inducements to part with Miss Theodosia's dresses; more hot water was required. After another steamy bath, they were cooled and wrung and draped over the crisscross clotheslines in the hot kitchen. Then Miss Theodosia temporarily retired from the field of battle.

Theodosia Baxter had come back from her travelings to this small ancestral town with a mildly disturbing taste in her mouth. "Settling down" at thirty-six was not at all to her mind; she would not settle down!

"If I catch you doing it, Theodosia Baxter!" she said. "If I catch you growing old! The minute you feel it coming on, you pack up and start for Rome! Or Paris! Or Turkistan! Start for Anywhere! Keep going!"

But, already, did she feel it coming on even before all her trunks were unpacked? She was a little frightened at certain signs. Now, when she sat down heavily — why did she sit down heavily? If some one had called upon her for scores of little services, so that she must hop up again, immediately — little piping voices: "Mother, where's my cap?" "Mother, make Johnnie stop plaguing me!" "Mother, come quick!" If a big John had come home to her, demanding her time or sympathy or service —

"No little Johns — no big one!" She

sighed. "Is that the matter with you, Theodosia Baxter? Well, for Heaven's sake, don't tell anybody! Keep a bold front."

She dozed a little in her rocker while she waited. Her plaintive reveries took the shape of a sober little dream wherein one Theodosia Baxter tottered on a cane and another walked briskly and youngly among Johns. Both Theodosias were thirty-six.

"Mercy!" she exclaimed, waking up. "Where's my cane? I must go and iron Stefana's dresses!" She felt oddly refreshed. Queer dream to refresh one! She found herself thinking kindly of Stefana.

"I hope she's sound asleep, and a pitying little girl angel with a nurse's cap under her halo will slip down and cure her thumbs before she wakes up."

The irons she had set to heating were much too hot. Should she run out-of-doors while one of them cooled, and lie in wait to catch the little nurse-angel on the wing or perhaps darting thrillingly down

to Stefana on a shooting star, breaking all speed limits! This was a night for adventure. The wild ride of a becapped and haloed little celestial in goggles would be an adventure! Miss Theodosia laughed out girlishly, not at all a tottery laugh on a cane, and the pleasant sound broke the midnight stillness.

The dresses were dry enough to roll into tight bundles. One she essayed to iron as it was. She began as soon as the iron was cool enough.

Miss Theodosia toiled — adventured — through the long hours into the short. It was unaccustomed toiling, and, like Stefana, she burned her thumbs. She had judgment and the skill that age kindly lends, in her favor, and slowly her delicate fingers undid the ravages of Stefana's patient endeavors and brought beauteous perfection out of apparent ruin. But the process was wearying and long. It would have been but half the labor to have begun at the beginning instead of at Stefana's poor little end.

At midnight, Miss Theodosia made herself cups of tea and sipped them thirstily. A wrist, both thumbs, and her testing forefinger smarted; she was tired and disheveled. But the spirit of adventure refused to die.

The fire burned red-hot and the irons must cool again. Miss Theodosia slipped out this time into the soft darkness.

"Let us hope Aunt Sarah will 'knit fast,'" she was thinking, with whimsical eyes. "But if she doesn't — Theodosia Baxter, dear, if Aunt Sarah is a slow knitter, you are in for it! I've no idea of letting you off. Baxters that begin, end."

It was dim starshine out-of-doors. Miss Theodosia was too late to see the nurse-angel riding on her star, her little cap and halo awry with the downhill glide through space. She was too late to see her go into the dark little House of Children — but she saw her come out. Distinctly, a misty little blur of white against the velvet background. Miss Theodosia started a very little — did she need pinching to wake her?

For the space of a clock-tick the little celestial appeared to hesitate, as though waiting for her star-steed to come within her hail. Then, floatingly, not walking, it seemed to Miss Theodosia, the mist of blurry white drew nearer. It came near to Miss Theodosia, and it was not the nurse-angel in cap and shining halo. It was Stefana!

The child was in her nightgown. One look into her wide, unseeing eyes was enough; Stefana was asleep. In a chattering little voice she was talking to herself. It was like a soft wail of sound.

"I must get them back! Quick, before she sees; I must iron them over. Perhaps if I starched them again — another coat of starch might hide the smooches. She mustn't see the smooches! If Mother should lose the chance — oh, I must get 'em back and starch 'em another coat! Mother mustn't lose her! My thumbs ache so!"

Was she coming straight toward the door? No, a fortunate whiff of breeze seemed to blow her aside like a little seed-puff, and

she went drifting by. She was apparently searching anxiously.

"I must find them! Quick, before she sees! Oh, there are the smooches. I see some of the smooches! But I can't find the rest of them —"

Miss Theodosia sprang forward in the direction of the pathetic little figure, but almost as quickly caught herself up. Sleepwalkers were not to be awakened suddenly. What then was to be done?

"I must get her back to bed without letting her wake," thought Miss Theodosia. A plan suggested itself. She caught off her large apron, rolled it into a bulky mass, and swiftly followed the small nightgowned figure. Her steps made no sound over the grass. It was but the work of an instant to lay the roll of apron in Stefana's arms. Instantly, at the feel of starched cloth in her hands, the tense little face relaxed.

"I've got 'em back!" Stefana muttered, and, as if from the relief of it, the troubled sleep seemed to calm and quiet down into deep oblivion to all troubles. To Miss

Theodosia's dismay Stefana slid quietly to the ground and dreamlessly slept. Here, indeed, was adventure! Even at twelve years and Stefana small, the child was too heavy to carry home.

"I don't dare to wake her," Miss Theodosia cried aloud, but softly, as if in fear of doing so.

"You needn't — hush! I'll carry her for you."

The voice seemed to materialize out of the gloom into something big and high and unexpectedly close at hand that rightly should have startled Miss Theodosia but failed to do so. Afterward, in the house again, among her irons, she was startled.

"I was going by and saw her — you can tell a sleepwalker by the way one walks. Glides. Now, when I lift her, gently support her head — that's it. Forward, march!"

"This way," Miss Theodosia directed in a whisper, though he was already moving this way. Shadow Man that he was, he stepped earthily, with thuds of his feet on the grass. Miss Theodosia's footsteps were

soft echoes. So they came to the little House of Flaggs.

"There's a light in that inside room, and I can see a bed. I'll lay her down, and you can go in afterward — and — er — smooth her out."

"Yes — yes, I'll wait out here," whispered Miss Theodosia with a curious solemnity in her face. Rome, nor Paris, nor Anywhere had offered adventure like this — not like this. Miss Theodosia had an odd feeling that this, too, was a dream — and a John. Would they all wake up together?

"Sound as a nut — never knew what hit her! But she wants straightening. New work for me; I'm not used to putting kiddies to bed."

"Oh, I'm not either!" breathed Miss Theodosia, "but I might straighten one. I don't suppose you — you kissed her thumbs? Of course not!" She laughed softly. "But I shall."

Now it was the Shadow Man's turn to laugh with a funny, explosive little effect as though he were not used to muffling his

laughs, — as if this playing Shadow Man were a new rôle.

"Why thumbs?" he whispered. "Why not lips, say, or eyes? I thought women kissed kiddies' eyes. Hope I haven't made a mistake —" as if he had some secret desire for women to kiss the eyes of little children. "If you don't mind kissing 'em when you go in there —"

"I shall kiss her thumbs," Miss Theodosia said firmly. "They were burned at the stake for me. I know how burned thumbs feel."

But the Shadow Man stubbornly persisted.

"I'll tell you what," he said. "I'll go back now and kiss her thumbs, if you'll kiss her eyes when you go in; as — er — a favor. 'Stoop over the little sleeper,' you know, and 'press your mother's lips to the closed blue orbs.'" He seemed to be quoting something.

"But I haven't any mother's lips," sighed Miss Theodosia, "only the kind for thumbs — just thumbs. I'm sorry," she added humbly. Curiously she experienced no

surprise at this intimate turn of a conversation with a Shadow Man at midnight.

"That's all right — that's all right," the Shadow Man assured her. "Only thought I'd feel a little better to prove it was done that way. Hadn't any business mixing up with women's lips and kiddies' orbs, anyway! Serves me right." And now it was his turn to be humble. "Good night," and he was gone.

It was into a tiny bedroom off the kitchen, where a needle of light from a turned-down lamp barely pricked the darkness, that Miss Theodosia found her way. She had a dim picture of littering little clothes about the room and on the flat pillows of the bed the round, flushed face of Evangeline. In a clothes basket beside the bed she dimly saw a little mound that might be Elly Precious — it was Elly Precious! The little mound stirred with a curious, nestling sound, and instantly Stefana stirred also and crooned. Even in her sleep she was the little Mother. Miss Theodosia felt her own throat tighten and fill.

Stefana still clasped the bundle of apron in her arms, and Miss Theodosia did not dare try to take it away from her. She merely arranged it a little more comfortably and smoothed Stefana out. Queer!—as if at some other time, in some passed-by existence, she had smoothed out a child. She seemed to know how. Suddenly she stooped and kissed, not Stefana's thumbs but her eyes.

"The starch!" murmured Stefana as Miss Theodosia turned away. "Some'dy get it!" The deep sleep had broken a little, and through the break trickled a thread of Stefana's troubles. Then, again, silence and peace. No sound from bed or clothes basket on the floor.

Outside, in the faint starlight, Miss Theodosia drew a long breath. She softly laughed. Curious how much like a sob a little laugh can be! Oh, starlit night of adventuring! What next? Miss Theodosia's mantle of gentle melancholy slid from her shoulders; she no longer felt apprehensions of growing old. Continually

she saw Evangeline's rosy face on that flat pillow, and the little mound of Elly Precious. She remembered how tiny the house had looked from the inside, and how many little littering clothes she had seen. The appealing quality of empty little clothes! In Miss Theodosia's inside room of her soul, something stirred behind the locked door.

The irons had cooled too much, and the fire was low. Miss Theodosia went to work again. As she worked, she talked to herself sociably.

"Adventures thicken! Stars, and angels in caps, and children that walk in their little sleeps! And little heaps in clothes baskets, that are babies! And — Theodosia Baxter — a Man! Out of a clear, inky sky! Why weren't you scared? How do you know — you never even saw his face — maybe he was a thief, and a marauder, and a thug!"

Granted, if thieves and marauders and those awful things, thugs, carry little loads of sleep as tenderly as women — and never

wake them; if they are polite and say good night —. What kind of marauding and — and thugging is that?

"What will Stefana think when she finds my apron in bed with her!" suddenly laughed Miss Theodosia, breaking the spell. "Funny Stefana! she goes to my heart, she and her starch — when they're asleep!"

But, awake, Stefana's starch went to Miss Theodosia's back and aching bones. It was three o'clock when she was ready to go to bed. Over chairs and the couch in her sitting-room, lay the three redeemed white dresses, soft again and very smoochless and smooth. Miss Theodosia stood and admired. She was full of pride and weariness. At last, at thirty-six, she had done real work; she loved the feel of it in her tired bones. She loved her night of adventuring. Life — she loved that. So she went to bed at three, when the birds were beginning to get up. If her throat — calm and grown-up throat — had not persistently tightened, she would have gone to sleep laughing at the remembrance of it

all. All the funny night. Why wasn't it funny? Why couldn't she laugh? She sat up in bed.

On the morning after her adventurous night, as Miss Theodosia lingered luxuriously over her late breakfast, came bursting in Evangeline Flagg. A gray-checked something waved from her hand like a flag of truce. Evangeline always burst into things — houses, and rooms, and excited little speech.

"Here it is! — that is, if it's yours. Stefana says to ask. 'Tain't ours. Mercy gracious, no! We don't take our aperns to bed. Stefana never heard of such a thing. Neither o' us never. In bed — right straight in bed! An' Stefana hugging it up like everything! She says to ask you if it's yours because it ain't ours, nor anybody else's, an' it's got to be somebody's apern, and once I thought I saw a gray'n' white one hanging through your window — I mean on a nail, but, mercy gracious, what was it doing in bed with me an' Stefana!"

Even Evangeline's breath had limitations. She stopped as headlong as she had begun. She unwound the large, voluminous-skirted apron from her grasp and extended it.

"Here 'tis, if it's yours," she gasped, spent. She was gazing at it with a species of awe; it was an "apern" of mystery, not a human apern. "An' if 't isn't, take it — Stefana said not to dare to bring it back. We — we're sort of afraid of it, honest. Though, of course, Stefana says it must 've blew in the window" — the tide of speech was coming in once more — "an' — an' sort of landed on the bed, an' Stefana kind of grabbed it in her sleep, thinking it was Elly Precious. But, mercy gracious!"

"Sit down," Miss Theodosia said, smiling. "Doesn't it tire you to talk as fast as that?"

"Some," admitted Evangeline, "but I don't mind. What I mind is ghosts — aperns an' the kind with — with legs." She dropped her voice. "I saw one las' night."

"Mercy gracious!" Miss Theodosia breathed.

Evangeline nodded solemnly. "Out the window. I woke up feelin' one, an' I saw it goin' across the grass. White. Slinky."

"Oh, not — slinky!" protested Miss Theodosia, suddenly championing the ghost-with-legs.

"Slinky," firmly. "I guess I'd a-screeched right out if I hadn't remembered the baby. Elly Precious is terrible hard to put to sleep second time. You aren't much acquainted with babies, are you?"

Again — so soon! Miss Theodosia's humility returned.

"We're acquainted, over to our house! Mother says babies are great edge — edge —"

"Educators?"

"That's it! Mercy gracious, then I should think Mother'd be graduated!"

After Evangeline's departure, Miss Theodosia set down her coffee cup and gave herself up to laughter. The room rang with the pleasant sound of it.

"Will you l-listen to yourself, Theodosia Baxter!" she cried at length, out of breath. "You actually sound happy!"

In the afternoon, a bevy of Miss Theodosia's old friends called on her as she sat on her front porch. They had intended, they said, to wait till the proper time, according to etiquette, for calls upon returned travelers.

"But we wanted to see you so much, after all this time," one of them said. "We decided we couldn't wait to be proper. Besides, it would be such a risk. While we waited, you'd run off again. It was really our only way. Ladies, will you see how lovely and white she looks! Perfectly spotless!" The speaker sighed. Her own dress was dark and spot-colored. "I don't see how you do it! I tell Andrew I'd rather dress in white than in velvet — I love it! But, there, I couldn't get a minute to wear the dresses; it would take all my days to do 'em up. Of course, with you it's different. I don't suppose you ever toiled over an ironing-board a day in your life."

Miss Theodosia gravely shook her head. "No," she said, curious little twinkling lines deepening round her eyes, "I never did — a day — in my life."

"That's what I thought! That's what I told Andrew. 'Theodosia Baxter don't know what work is,' I told him. It's easy enough for some women to wear lovely white things. Simplest thing in the world!"

Miss Theodosia's cryptic little smile lingered on her lips and in the clear windows of her eyes, as she gazed past the voluble wife of Andrew, through her vines, at the little House of Children next door. She imagined she heard Stefana singing, high up and sweet, over her work. Wait! — that was not a singing sound!

A single shriek shot above the clear humming noise that might be Stefana. Then another — a third!

"Some one is hurt!" cried Miss Theodosia, and she kilted her smooth white skirts and ran.

Again that dread shriek! Over her

shoulder, as she ran, Miss Theodosia gave directions to her startled callers.

"Telephone for a doctor — any doctor. In the side hall — on a table!" But could any doctor save the life of that terrible shriek? If it came once more — It came! Miss Theodosia involuntarily closed her eyes to shut out a sight of horror.

"Mercy gracious!"

She opened them hurriedly at the soft collision of herself with Evangeline.

"Who is it? Is it the baby? I've sent for the doctor." Half-remembered, half-read first aids crowded her mind confusedly. Warm water and mustard — that was for hemorrhage — no, no — poison! But did you apply it inside or out? What was that about laying the patient up hill — feet higher — or was it feet lower — down hill?

"Take me there, quick! We must do what we can till the doct — oh, the poor baby!"

"Mercy gracious goodness! Elly Precious is eatin' bread an' molasses. He's only et one slice, an' most o' that's on his

outside. They aint' an'thing worse'n molasses the matter with El—"

"There! Oh, there!" As another mournful cry split the air. — "Oh, that! What is it? Who is it?"

"Mercy gra— why, that's Carruthers bein' a steam whistle. Did he scare you? He does do it pretty loud when he's gettin' up steam; you see, he don't know how loud he does it, because he's deaf o' hearin'. We can't bear to lower him, but we only let him be a steam whistle for a treat — when he's 'specially good — Mother said to. Stefana found him washin' his face 'free greatest' this mornin', so she let him —. Quick, shut your ears! He's goin' off again!"

But, this time, Miss Theodosia heard, unalarmed. To her own surprise, she listened almost enjoyingly. To be able to make a noise like that! The sheer vitality and youth of it compelled admiration.

"If I could do that —" began Miss Theodosia's thought, then broke off hastily as the mental vision of herself in the act of bein' a steam whistle appeared to her.

"You do it this way," explained Evangeline, inserting a forefinger in each corner of her mouth and preparing to steam-whistle.

"No, no, I don't do it any way!" Miss Theodosia protested smilingly. "Do you think — do you think, perhaps, he has been sufficiently rewarded for washing his own face, now? Because, you see, I have callers on my porch."

"Mercy gracious — I see 'em! I'll go right an' stop Carruthers! That's what Stefana said — that we'd ought to remember you wasn't in Europe now."

"I think I could hear steam whistles there!" Miss Theodosia smiled. But Evangeline's sober mind continued its line of thought.

"Stefana says if you'll hang somethin' red out when you're asleep, or got callers, or anythin', then she'll make us play funeral."

"Oh, no — not that!" No red flag of warning could justify playing funeral.

"Well, Hold-Your-Breath, then. We can't make much noise holding our

breaths! Stefana's the champion Hold-Your-Breath-er. You take an awful long breath — this way —" But, already, Miss Theodosia was on her way home. She found her callers moving agitatedly about.

"Central asked what doctor, and for the life of me I couldn't remember a living doctor's name in this town. 'Anybody,' I told her. 'Tell him to come quick; somebody must be dying over to the little Flagg place.'"

Miss Theodosia lifted a hand to stem the tide of Mrs. Andrew's words.

"He's stopped dying — listen! It's all quiet now; it was only play. I'll head Central off. Excuse me a minute — I mean, another minute!"

But Central had done her work well — beyond heading-off. Already an automobile was speeding up the road; behind it clattered a hurriedly-driven buggy. Miss Theodosia saw them both stopping at the little Flagg place. She smiled. She was not needed over there to make any explanations or apologies — Evangeline was there!

CHAPTER III

SHE sat on her porch after the visitors had gone, thinking strange Miss Theodosia thoughts. A man, coming up her front path and lifting a soft felt hat, interrupted the strangest thought of all.

"I beg your pardon. Is this where somebody needs help? I was told —"

Miss Theodosia laughed outright.

"I do need help. Were you ever a steam whistle? You put two fingers in your mouth, one in each corner — I was trying to get up my courage to do it!"

The felt hat rolled down the steps, the stranger needing both his hands.

"Like this?"

"Ye-s. I never saw a steam whistle, you know. That was what I was wishing."

"Heard one? Because I can give a demonstration."

"Don't!" Miss Theodosia shut her ears.

"I heard one — demonstration. I thought some one was dying, at least."

"Oh, that was the 'help wanted!' I see. My services are not required, then; it was a false alarm."

Miss Theodosia was on her feet, remembering her manners. "It was a true enough alarm; won't you sit down? I think my nerves need a doctor."

"Did I call myself a doctor? I am a reformed doctor, madam. It is some years since I got out. But I thought, in a very urgent case — fits, you know, or something like that — Thank you, I won't sit down. My work calls me."

Miss Theodosia inclined her head politely, but curiosity seized her. How curious she was getting about many things!

"I wish I knew —" she began.

"Yes, madam?"

"What work 'calls' reformed doctors. After they are — out."

The stranger's big, unharnessed laugh was almost startling to Miss Theodosia. Why? She had never heard just such a

big, unharnessed laugh before. She had heard a big harnessed laugh — when? Before she could answer her own thought, or the stranger could answer her spoken query, a hurry of small feet sounded. Only Evangeline's feet could break speed limits like that.

"Oh, Miss Theodosia — oh, I don't want to int'rupt, but just soon's he's gone —"

"He's gone," sighed Miss Theodosia, as the child came up. "You mustn't interrupt again, that way, unless it's a very urgent case — fits or something." In spite of proper vexation, she smiled. "Who was that man, Evangeline, that just went away?"

"Oh, I don't know — I wasn't acquainted with his back; that's every speck o' him I saw. Oh! oh! oh!"

"Evangeline Flagg, what is the matter now?"

"'D you ever do up a man, Miss Theodosia? Stiff — awful stiff? Stefana says it's bad enough to do women up. She's havin' a dreadful time! We can't get the

stiffness out; I been helpin'. It stands up alone!" Suddenly, without warning, Evangeline went off into a series of shrill shrieks.

"Stop me! Stop me! Don't l-let Stefana hear me! Don't l-let me laugh!"

This was an urgent case — fits or something, surely! Miss Theodosia's eyes sought the horizon for a reformed doctor. In lack of one, she shook Evangeline.

"Stop at once! Make yourself stop; count ten!"

"One! Two-o! Th-ree!" shrieked Evangeline, through to ten. Ten separate shrieks. Then, abruptly, she ceased.

"Mercy gracious, I've stopped! I hope Stefana wasn't listenin'. But she wasn't; she was cryin'. I left her cryin'. If you could come over —. Honest, we can't do a thing! We thought you'd probably did up men."

Miss Theodosia never had. Not so — awful a thing as that!

"It stands up alone, with both arms out! I don't dass to go back. I shall laugh if I do, an' if I laugh, Stefana'll cry. She don't think it's f-funny." The shrieks showed

signs of returning, and Miss Theodosia again had recourse to stern measures.

"Count ten!" she demanded, as she shook.

They went back together to the mysterious something that stood alone with both arms out. It was in that pose as they approached it. Miss Theodosia thought it was f-funny; an awful desire to shriek like Evangeline took possession of her. She counted ten in inward haste.

"I can't do anything with it!" wailed poor Stefana. "And Elly Precious gets into it, and makes it walk! He's in it now."

"It's walkin'!" shrieked Evangeline, as the portentously stiff shirt staggered a little to one side. Stefana, filled with enthusiasm and generosity of soul, had starched not the bosom alone but the entire shirt. She had done it thoroughly. The result was alarming. It was a terrible shirt!

"Tell me what to do — somebody tell me!" entreated the little laundress. "I've unstarched it, and unstarched it, and seems as if it got stiffer."

"Boiling water," breathed Miss Theodosia, too spent with her struggles not to laugh, to admit of further speech.

"Wait! Don't anybody dass to pour boilin' water on till I get Elly Precious out! Come to Evangeline this minute, darlin' dear — no, they shan't boil him!"

Elly Precious emerged, crowing. The deaf-but-not-dumb little Flagg appeared, to swell the number around the Terrible Shirt. Stefana dried her tears. Miss Theodosia had the sense of being looked up to — relied upon. She rose to the occasion buoyantly. As unused as Stefana to men's bosoms, she yet stepped into the breach. Unused to issuing orders, she issued them.

"Evangeline, you and Carruthers see to the baby. Stefana, come with me. Bring — it."

They went back to the big house, she with that new and intoxicating sense of importance, and Stefana with the Terrible Shirt.

"Whose is it — that?" she asked, indicating the creaking white garment. "What were you doing with it?"

"Starching it," mumbled poor Stefana. "It took most a package. He said he liked his stiff. 'Put in plenty o' starch,' he said to Mother, and she always did. So I did. I thought if he said —"

"If who said?" It took a long time to establish the identity of the Terrible Shirt.

"If he did, the man it belongs to."

"What man — who?"

"The man that writes things."

"What things?"

"We don't know exactly. Evangeline thinks tracts. She says his room was all full o' half sheets o' paper — lying all over everywhere. She saw 'Good Lord' on one. Perhaps it's sermons. Mother always sent Evangeline home with his wash; I never went. He is a very nice man — oh, that's why I feel so bad about his shirt! I wouldn't care if he was an — an infidel!"

"Bless your heart!"

Miss Theodosia turned suddenly and embraced Stefana and the shirt. "Don't worry any more," she said; "you and I

will work wonders with that Tract Man's shirt! Stefana, put the kettle on and we'll go to it! There's nothing two determined people can't do, once they've put their minds on it."

Together they labored, and the impossible happened. Theodosia Baxter did up a man! She — and Stefana — succeeded in getting the starch out of the surrounding area and into the bosom of the Terrible Shirt. They got much starch in. Inspiration appeared to come to Miss Theodosia. Even the really awful task of ironing that bosom till it glittered and shone in unwrinkled board-like expanse was at length accomplished. Miss Theodosia was justly proud of herself — and of Stefana; she insisted upon including Stefana in her triumphs.

"Eureka!" she exulted. "Call Evangeline, Stefana, and Elly Precious, and Carruthers! Call in a Chinaman, if you like, and tell him to look at that! Ask him to beat it!"

"There isn't any in this town," responded

literal Stefana. "That's why Mother did bosoms. She'd a good deal rather not've."

"But I love to do bosoms!" sang Miss Theodosia. "I never felt so worth while in my life before — an artist in starch, Stefana!"

"Well, you've done beautifully — I never did see!" the grateful Stefana cried. "But I'm afraid it's kind of gone to your head. I think you better lie down."

"Send for the Reformed Doctor! Stefana, what are you doing with my beautiful bosom?"

"I won't muss it. I'm just going to take it home and sew the buttons on. There's two off. Mother always sewed 'em on; he pays two cents extra for repairs."

Miss Theodosia's fair face flushed. "You don't stir a step with it! I have buttons and a spool of thread — what I do, I finish doing! Give it to me."

For the first time, Miss Theodosia handled a man's garment intimately. It lay stiffly across her lap. She sewed on the two buttons; she mended a tiny "hog-tear." Life

had taken on new interests — bosoms and buttons. She thrilled — when had she ever thrilled before? Ironing her own dresses had been a poor, tame business. She would be sorry to part with this shirt!

And then Evangeline came.

"Mercy gracious, doesn't it look elegant! I came over because he's come for his shirt. He says he's goin' to begin a new story, an' he always has to have a clean shirt on. An' his hair cut — he's got it cut. I guess that bosom'll match his hair all right! It's perfectly lovely!"

"What did you do with Elly Precious, Evangeline Flagg!" demanded Stefana.

"That's it — that's why I got to hurry back. He's keepin' Elly Precious for me, an' he don't know what to do with babies. He says all his are paper ones — paper babies! He gave Elly Precious his knife, an' opened the blades to amuse him! He said he guessed Elly Precious wouldn't hurt 'em!" Evangeline's face registered great scorn. "If you'll give it to me, I'll carry it to him," she concluded, holding out

her hand for the shirt. But Miss Theodosia sewed calmly on. She had found a second tear larger than the first. It would be better to strengthen it with a little piece underneath. She would find a white scrap in her bag of pieces.

"It is not ready yet. He can wait. But you must not wait, Evangeline. Elly Precious may be playing with his pistol, if he carries one."

"He don't. He ain't a pistol-man, but, mercy gracious, how you scare me! You comin' too, Stefana?"

"Yes, Stefana can go now. She is all through," which was Miss Theodosia's kind inclusion of Stefana. That, again, was curiously new to Miss Theodosia. Psychological changes were taking place — or were they just plain tugs on Miss Theodosia's heartstrings?

She sat and sewed.

"Patching — I'm patching!" she laughed to herself. "And here I've been hiring my own mending done! Theodosia Baxter, see what you are doing; you are patching a

shirt for a man! No, I'm not, either! I'm doing it for Stefana — what are you talking about?"

Some one came up her steps and knocked on her open door. But she was too engrossed to hear. The patch underneath had slipped a little askew. She ripped out some of the stitches and began again. She caught herself humming as she worked.

"Please may I have my shirt?" a voice asked meekly. "That story is promised for next month. It's the twenty-eighth, now."

Evangeline's Tract Man stood in the doorway, soft felt hat in hand, twinkles in his eyes. Evangeline's Tract Man was the Reformed Doctor! If Miss Theodosia had been eighteen instead of thirty-six she would not have blushed more beautifully, but she continued to patch. She was caught in the act; no help for it now. But she would finish — that — patch.

"So it's you! So that's the work Reformed Doctors do!"

"Madam, yes. When stories appeal to them more than pills and tonics, they re-

form and write stories. They have to!" he cried, suddenly in earnest, "When one is life, and the other death —"

"Oh, if it was death to them — your patients," she murmured. Then, ashamed of her own flippancy: "Of course, I didn't mean anything as silly as that! I meant — I meant, please sit down while I finish this patch. There, in that easy-chair. There are magazines on the table."

There was one magazine with his own name in the list of contents. He opened it at that page and gazed down upon it quite soberly.

"My name is John Bradford," he said, as if reading. Miss Theodosia started a little, but it was not as he thought, in his innocent vanity. Miss Theodosia got no farther than the first part of the name — so he was a John! She glanced quickly at the doorway, measuring him in her mind as he had stood against the lintel. He had reached a long way up — a long man. The Shadow Man had been a long shadow. Something told her —

"If you are thinking of putting me anywhere, put me into a story like that." *Page* 66.

"Did you ever carry a child in your arms and lay her on a bed? In the middle of the night? Did you do it last night? Are you the same man?"

"I am the same man I was last night," he answered gravely. "I was John Bradford then, too. Didn't I carry her all right? What was the matter?" Suddenly he leaned forward in the chair. "Did you kiss her thumbs?" he demanded.

"I kissed her eyes."

They were silent for a little, while Miss Theodosia set small, nervous stitches in John Bradford's shirt, and John Bradford twiddled the edges of the magazine. He stole glances, now and then, at this strange woman with whom he seemed to have come so oddly into contact. He could make a story of her dark hair, straight shoulders, beautiful hands. He could not get a good view of her full face. Bending over a bed, kissing a little sleeper's eyes — he could work her in that way. If he knew her a little better —

"I knew they did it!"

"Did what — who?"

"Women — kissed that way. You have proved it now."

"I'm not women. I'm just one woman, and I never did it in my life before."

"Well, you liked doing it, didn't you? I could put you in, liking it."

The shirt slid to the floor, and Miss Theodosia gave her visitor a full view of her face.

"Are you making 'copy' of me? Because if you are thinking of putting me anywhere, put me into a story like that. I'd like it. I mean, with little children in a bed — and one in a clothes basket! Say I tucked them in — Yes, I liked kissing Stefana's eyes. I should love to have another chance. It's nothing to be ashamed of, is it, to like little children?"

"I like 'em. I always have."

"Well, I always haven't. Only very lately — it's queer. When I came home here and found all those children next door — mercy gracious!"

They both laughed. Laughing together

is a great acquaintancer. Miss Theodosia suddenly thought of something and laughed a little more.

"My name is Theodosia Baxter," she said. They rose and shook hands gravely. They were decently introduced. The beautiful shiny bosom of the shirt lay between them like a white mirror and Miss Theodosia caught the man's glance on it.

"Is it anything to be ashamed of — doing up a shirt?" she demanded.

"Not doing it up like that! That's a work of art!"

"A work of heart — I did it for Stefana. I've got quite fond of it now, and shall hate to part with it. It's a friend."

"A bosom friend," he parried. Again they laughed and grew more acquainted. Miss Theodosia made tea in her dainty Sèvres cups. The faintest flecks of pink made her face youthful. Miss Theodosia was a good-looking woman always, but, animated, her face was really lovely. John Bradford was better used to paper women, like paper babies, but his taste recognized

flesh-and-blood attractiveness. He had always been a lonely man — until now.

"I'm having a beautiful time," he sighed. "Is it anything to be ashamed of, to have a beautiful time?"

"Or two cups of tea? Please! This is my company tea — warranted good to write stories on!"

"Oh — stories. Are there such things? Did I ever write one? Have I got to write another?"

"It's the twenty-eighth," Miss Theodosia reminded demurely. "But you will need another cup of tea. How long does it take?"

"To drink another cup?"

"To write another story. Tell me about it. Perhaps I could do it. You take a blotter and a pen and plenty of half-sheets of paper — 'tracts,' Evangeline calls them! Then you write 'Good Lord!' That is what Evangeline says you wrote on a tract! She said maybe it was a sermon."

"Oh — Evangeline! And speaking of angels —"

"Mercy gracious! You're here — both o' you! An' somebody's gone an' spilled a drop of somethin' on that beautiful bosom!"

"A tear-drop, Evangeline, because she wouldn't give it to me."

"Tea drop!" sniffed Evangeline. "Guess I know! After all Stefana's work! Miss Theodosia, can Elly Precious eat your grass? He's out there now. He don't really eat it; he just kind of pretends. Mother says Elly Precious ought to be put out to pasture. We haven't got any grass to speak of, over to our house."

"Don't speak of it! Of course he can eat mine, if you think it is edible. Ask the Reformed Doctor."

"Him a doctor? Mercy gracious — honest? Then he knows if Elly Precious 'd ought to eat grass — not really eat, you know."

"Just graze a little — let him graze." The Reformed Doctor rose to his feet and held out his hand to Miss Theodosia. "I'll go out and see how he does it. It's lucky Evangeline came in, or I might not have

known enough to go at all. I've had a beautiful time. I'll put you in with the bedful of kiddies."

"And the clothes basket?"

"And the clothes basket."

"You haven't got your shirt — mercy gracious! I thought that's what you came after," reminded Evangeline.

"Was it?" the Reformed Doctor said. "Give it to me, Evangeline."

"Not naked! Without wrappin' up! I never did see!"

"It's such a good-looking shirt — well, then, wrap it up, wrap it up. I've got a newspaper in my pocket. Put that round it, Evangeline." He turned again to his hostess. "It will be a good story if I put — the clothes basket — in it. They won't send it back. Good-by."

He was off to inspect Elly Precious' grazing-ground. Evangeline, at the window where she had gone to make sure her darlin' dear was safe, presented to Miss Theodosia a square, bony little back that was curiously like that of a dwarfed old woman.

The trail of innocent Elly Precious was over that stoopy little figure. Miss Theodosia looked with softened eyes. Then a smile grew in them, wrinkling their corners whimsically. She was noticing something else besides the little old-lady back. Evangeline's braids toed in! Tight and flaxen, they stood out in rounded curves, converging suddenly to the bit of faded ribbon that tied them together. There was something suspicious looking about that ribbon — "Stefana starched it!" smiled Miss Theodosia's thought.

The small figure whirled face about.

"There, *he* can see to him awhile." Evangeline was always cheerfully oblivious to any confusion of ideas arising from her use of personal pronouns. "I'm tired. Children are a great care," said Evangeline. She seated herself in an easy chair and dangled thin legs.

"If you drank tea — I'll make you a cup of cocoa, Evangeline."

"Oh, mercy gracious, no! I'm not as tired as *cocoa*. Jus' sit-'n'-a'-chair tired.

You know how it feels — no, you don't either. I forgot. I guess you are pretty lucky. No, I don't guess so *either!*" Evangeline suddenly straightened on the edge of the big chair and eyed Miss Theodosia sternly, as though that innocent soul had been the one guilty of disloyalty to darlin' dears.

"Children are a great comfort," declaimed Evangeline with emphasis. She might have been the mother of six comforts. Tenderness crept into her eyes, and her freckles seemed to fade out, and even the small blunt nose of her take on middle-agedness and motherliness. "'Specially when you undress 'em. They're so darlin' an' soft! You ever undressed one — a reg'lar *baby* one? Of course not one o' your own when you never *had* any, but I thought p'raps you might've undressed a grandbaby or somethin' —"

Miss Theodosia shook a humbled head.

"No," she murmured, "I never undressed even a grandbaby." And curiously she failed either to smile at the child's little

notion or to wince at the advanced age it implied for her. She looked across the room from her big chair to Evangeline's with rather a wistful look. She was envying Evangeline.

"I'm sorry," the child said gently, a little embarrassed by the unexpected solemnity of the moment. To relieve it, she had recourse to a sudden funny memory of her own undressings of Elly Precious. She broke hurriedly into laughter.

"I have to have an extra pig for my baby!" she shrilled. "Takes six instead o' five! You know where it ends, 'This little pig said: "Quee! Quee! Quee! can't get over the barn-door sill"?' Mercy gracious, you don't know the little pigs, I s'pose— " More embarrassment. Even Evangeline was losing presence of mind.

"Oh, yes!" Miss Theodosia brightened perceptibly. "I know the one that went to market and the one that stayed at home — all five of them I know."

"But you don't know Elly Precious's extra little pig!" crowed the reassured

Evangeline. "Just *us* know that one. I made him up. When you have six toes, — I mean when Elly Precious has, — you have to have six pigs. After the one that can't get over the barn-door sill, I say: 'This little pig said —' wait, I'll say the last two together so you'll see they rhyme beautifully. Reg'lar poetry.

"'This little pig said, "Quee! Quee! Quee! can't get over the barn-door sill."

"'*This* little pig said, "He! He! He! when you tickle, I can't keep still!'"

"Elly Precious wiggles it when I tickle! We laugh like everything. I think it is pretty good poetry," added Evangeline modestly.

"It is beautiful poetry. I never could have begun to make up such a lovely, ticklish little pig!"

Evangeline leaned back again in the soft cushiony embrace of the great chair and actually achieved a moment of silence. The talkative clock on Miss Theodosia's mantel filled in the space. Then once more Evangeline:

"But I shall never have any."

"Any — pigs?" smilingly.

"Children. Not any. I've decided I'll rest. They're such a care. But of course I can run in an' undress Stefana's an' Elly Precious's — mercy gracious, Elly Precious's!"

It required too great a mental effort to visualize them. Elly Precious's children were *funny!* Evangeline giggled softly. "Then I'll be a gran'mother, won't I! I've always wanted to be a gran'mother an' say what I did when *I* was a child an' how I always *minded.*" A fresh giggle. "'*I* never had to be *told to* twice, my dears,' I'll say to Elly Precious's children! They'll all be my dears. I'll help bring 'em up. Isn't it queer," broke forth Evangeline suddenly, "how when you get to be old you never were bad when you were young? The badnesses have kind of — kind of faded out. I bet there *were* badnesses!"

And Miss Theodosia found herself nodding decisively. She, too, bet there were.

A hilarious little crow suddenly sounded from without the window; it was accompanied by a deep man-sound of mirth. Miss Theodosia and Evangeline smiled across at each other indulgently.

"Elly Precious is havin' a good time. That's his good-time noise. Oh, I think he's a nice person, don't you?"

"Nice? I love him!" cried Miss Theodosia warmly. Her face that was still the face of a girl was tenderly flushed. "I love every inch of him, Evangeline."

"Merry gra— that's a lot of lovin'! I guess you are ahead o' me!"

"Evangeline Flagg, aren't you ashamed! When he is the dearest, cunningest —"

"Not — not *cunnin'est.* But he's got beautiful whiskers. I mean if he didn't shave 'em off. When he came, he had 'em on. You can't love his whiskers when you never saw —"

Miss Theodosia held up a limp hand to stem this terrible tide of words.

"Oh, stop! *wait,* Evangeline!" she begged. "Who are you talking about?"

Why stop for grammatic rules at a time like this?

"Why, he — *him*. I said I liked him, an' you said you lov —"

"I have been talking about Elly Precious, naturally," Miss Theodosia returned stiffly. "You are very careless with your pronouns, Evangeline," she added with an effect of severity. Her cheeks that persisted still in being a girl's cheeks had grown a warm, becoming pink. In pink Miss Theodosia was lovely.

"Don't you think you'd better relieve Elly Precious' caretaker by this time? He may not enjoy being left in charge quite so long."

"Not enjoy! Come an' see him not enjoy!" sang Evangeline from the window. She was flattening her nose against the pane and bubbling with sympathetic glee. Miss Theodosia went over and stood beside her.

Out there the two of them were frolicking together — two joyous children. It was the good old game of Peek-a-boo, but seemed a new, surprising game to Miss

Theodosia. The big playmate on the grass spread a handkerchief over the little playmate's face, and with a shriek of joy the little playmate did the rest. Then the big child's turn — turn and turn about. Deep voice and thin, sweet tinkle of baby voice joined in a curiously harmonious chorus that rang through the window pane into the two pairs of listening ears.

It was a new light in which to see — a new sound in which to hear John Bradford. Miss Theodosia had a guilty consciousness of being an eavesdropper, yet she kept on eavesdropping. At a particular climax in the little play, she laughed aloud softly. Evangeline wriggled with enjoyment. Her fingers drummed applause on the glass, and the big player glanced quickly up and saw the two lookers-on. He did not hesitate in the play, did not stop the next little gleeful peek. Miss Theodosia loved it in him for not stopping. They were not ashamed — Elly Precious and John Bradford.

CHAPTER IV

IN the next few days Miss Theodosia unpacked the rest of her trunks and put the things away neatly in permanent places. She sang as she did it. Life seemed a singing thing to Miss Theodosia who had been a lonely woman — until now. Now she could look out of her window and see the little House of Flaggs. Any minute Evangeline might burst in. The steam whistle might blow. The Shadow Reformed-Doctor Man might come for another cup of tea. Anything might happen.

Something did happen, but it was not a singing thing. Evangeline did burst in. It was some days later than the Day of the Shirt. Miss Theodosia sat comfortably sipping her afternoon tea. Two dainty cups were before her.

"Mercy gracious — mercy, mercy, mercy gracious! This is the worst! This is worse

than Aunt Sarah! An' to think it's Elly Precious, my darlin' dear! An' to think I never had —! An' to think I did it myself!"

Even to Evangeline, words failed to express this worst of all things. She dropped, a little leaden thing of despair, into Miss Theodosia's great chair and rocked herself in anguish.

"What is it, dear?" Miss Theodosia cried anxiously. The little word of endearment slipped out unconsciously, though she was not used to "dears." But she was not used to this, either — this rocking in anguish of a little child in her great chair.

"Can't you stop crying and tell me?" Evangeline not able to talk! Miss Theodosia was actually alarmed. If speech did not return quickly — but speech returned.

"Oh, mercy gracious me!" Evangeline sobbed, rocking harder, "to think I went an' set him right down in the middle of 'em — right slap in the middle! An' he didn't want to be set down. Elly Precious despises the Benjamin baby. He knows he's

a girl, an' girl-babies don't count. But I set him down — oh, mercy gracious me, I went an' set him down, slap!"

Sobs and words collided and inextricably mixed. In the dark Miss Theodosia waited; she saw no light as yet.

"If I could only have 'em — if I only had've, anyway! Then I could take care of my darlin' dear. But Elly Precious's is the only measles we ever had in the family."

Ah, light! Miss Theodosia blinked in the sudden inflow of it. Evangeline's released tongue leaped ahead.

"How'd I know the Benjamin baby had 'em when she only just sneezed? Oh, I suppose she sneezed 'em all around, an' I set Elly Precious down in 'em! Right in a nest o' measles!"

"What was Elly Precious doing there? I don't remember any Benjamins."

"No'm— oh, no'm. They're very recent. It's that house with the baby-pen in the front yard to keep their baby in. I set Elly Precious down in it, too, one day."

Evangeline shuddered. "While I was gettin' Stefana's starch at the store; I asked if I could, till I got back."

Miss Theodosia's face put on sternness. "What was the mother of the Benjamin baby thinking of, to let you?" she demanded.

"Oh, I don't know — I don't know! That's a very speckled baby, anyway, an' perhaps she didn't know measles from speckles. He didn't bloom out reg'lar built till next day — I mean she didn't — oh, I don't mean the mother didn't —"

"I know, dear; I know what you mean," soothed Miss Theodosia gently.

"Yes'm, that's what I mean. Next day they found out for sure."

"But have you found out 'for sure'? How do you know Elly Precious has the measles? Has he — bloomed out? Perhaps his are speck—"

"Elly Precious!" rose Evangeline's voice of indignation. "He's the unspeckledest baby you ever saw! I guess — I guess you never saw Elly Precious!"

Stefana appeared suddenly in the doorway, — a blanched and frightened Stefana. But she was determinedly calm.

"He's fell asleep, and Carruthers is watching him through the door. I told him not to go any nearer'n that. I came over to ask if I'd better send word to Mother. He said to ask you."

"Carruthers?" Miss Theodosia was a little bewildered.

"The Tract Man. He's the one that — that discovered Elly Precious's measles when we found he was broken out — I mean Elly Precious broken out —"

"Yes, yes, I know. He is a doctor — I mean —" Miss Theodosia caught herself up firmly. One at least must steer a clear course.

"He was goin' past," Evangeline put in, "an' I asked him, if he uster be a doctor, wouldn't he please to be one now an' 'xamine Elly Precious's spots."

"Measles," Stefana said briefly and hopelessly. "Shall we send for Mother, or what'll we do? Aunt Sarah isn't knitting."

"Aunt Sarah —" began poor Miss Theodosia. Would she ever get used to little Flaggs? Evangeline broke in gloomily with explanation.

"No'm, not knittin', Mother wrote Stefana. Kind of — of unravelin' instead. An' Mother's caught it."

Miss Theodosia turned appealing eyes to Stefana.

"Her knee's bad, too. Maybe it's just rheumatism, but she borrows Aunt Sarah's crutches when they're empty. I don't see how she'd get home —"

"Don't send for her!" Miss Theodosia directed. Some inner voice seemed to say it through her lips. The same dictate from within prompted the rest.

"Bring the baby over here. Bring all his nightgowns. I'll take care of him. It won't do for all you children to come down. Does the Reform — does the doctor think you can have caught them already? I don't believe it! Not till the disease is further advanced."

"That's what he said — not till." Stef-

ana hurried in eagerly. "*He* didn't believe it."

"The Benjamin baby wasn't further advanced," doubted Evangeline discouragingly.

"Never you mind the Benjamin baby! You bring your baby over here at once with his nightgowns! I believe we're in time. I'll be reading up my medicine book. You can tell the doctor to come here instead of to your house. Don't any of you dare to kiss Elly Precious good-by!"

Miss Theodosia was moving briskly about the room, doing strange things, — pulling down shades and drawing together draperies.

"Mustn't have too much light, though maybe that is later on, too. I'm sure there is something about being careful of the eyes. Evangeline, wait! Let Stefana go. I don't trust you; you might kiss him."

"Yes'm, I might," sighed poor little Evangeline. "He's my darlin' dear." A terrible separation yawned before her like a bottomless pit of desolation. How was she to live Elly Preciousless?

"Can't I come over an'— an' hold him when he isn't — when he isn't sneezing?" she suddenly sobbed forth. Miss Theodosia was too engrossed to be sympathetic. There were many things to think of.

"Come over?—I should say not! You can't do anything but look through the window, and I shall ask the doctor if that's safe. Now listen — dear," again the "dear" slipped through her lips unconsciously. "Listen! When you see Stefana coming, you go out the back door! I wish I'd told her to bring him in the clothes basket instead of in her arms —"

"I'll tell her to! Through the window. I'll tell her to bring him by the handles," and Evangeline hurried away excitedly.

An hour later Miss Theodosia, in a voluminous white apron and a hastily invented white cap, had formally assumed her astonishing new rôle. Under the cap Miss Theodosia's cheeks were prettily pink. It was becoming to her to be Elly Precious' nurse. But the queer feeling of it! An hour ago Theodosia Baxter, in a big house,

alone; now this becapped and pink-cheeked Theodosia in a house with a baby! It was an exciting change; what else might it become? She was a little afraid of Elly Precious.

"Not now, while he is asleep, but when he wakes —" she thought. What would she do with Elly Precious when he waked?

Of course, she had sent for the Reformed Doctor, and equally, of course, she would do precisely what he told her to do. But how would it feel? So far, it felt queer.

"I'll wait and see," she concluded with philosophy. At six the doctor came. It was significant how he had left his rôle of authorship at home and came physicianly, brisk and competent.

"Measles haven't changed, anyway, in ten years," he said as he removed his coat. Long ago, as a doctor, John Bradford had had his idiosyncrasies, and one of them had been to work in his shirt sleeves. The laying aside of his coat now had, if Miss Theodosia had but known, bridged over the ten years.

"Am I quarantined?" demanded the nurse.

"You are," promptly replied the doctor.

"Mercy gracious!"

Silence while the tiny patient was carefully examined, with so delicate a touch that he slept on.

"For how long?" then.

"Oh — weeks. Two, perhaps. Perhaps three. He is beginning to be feverish in earnest now. You got him over here just in time. May I have a glass of water?"

Miss Theodosia went away to get it on shaking legs. She almost staggered. The plot was getting thick!

"If you think his mother ought to be sent for — I'm afraid I'm in a blue funk!" She had returned and was splashing the water over the edge of the glass as she held it out. He laughed reassuringly. His face, turned sidewise up at her, was as reviving as cool water upon a faint. Miss Theodosia "came to."

"I've got over it. Go ahead — tell me precisely what you want done. Write it

down somewhere. I can read writing! And I can't forget it. Of course I can rock him?"

He did not answer at once, and she misinterpreted his silence.

"I shall rock him," she said with firmness. "Written down or not written down." And again he laughed, with the same curiously explosive little effect as when she had first heard him do it as a Shadow Man.

It was long after he left before Elly Precious woke. With remarkable presence of mind, Miss Theodosia had darkened the room to make the difference between herself and Evangeline or Stefana as inconspicuous as possible. It helped. Elly Precious, even busy with his measles, might have vigorously refused this strange new ministering. But in the darkness he accepted it with a measure of resignation. He appeared to be looking inward at his own poor little pains instead of outward or upward at Miss Theodosia. She wisely refrained from speech during those first critical moments.

Ten-year-old arms may not be as steady for cradling as thirty-six-year olds. Miss Theodosia's were steady and soft. The baby nestled into them and she rocked him.

She was rocking a baby! She was glad to be alone in the dark. The sensation rather overwhelmed her. Then Elly Precious flung up little hot hands and touched her face, and the sensation was no longer a new one. Surely she had felt it before. Was it in another incarnation that she had rocked a little child? The small, hot hands tugged at her heartstrings — they must have tugged, just so, at that ancient rocking. It was a beautiful tune, but not a new tune that the small hands played. No, no — not new!

Miss Theodosia began to croon softly, no longer afraid of sound. And Elly Precious snuggled deeper.

Shut in together — she and he and the measles — they grew accustomed to each other. After the first, the days went rather fast, with Evangeline's help through the window and under the door. Evangeline

Evangeline established a stage of action outside the window.
Page 92.

helped from the first. Miss Theodosia found little letters emerging through the tight crack under her outside door. The first one she read smilingly:

"He likes jiggy tunes best — please sing him jiggy tunes."

So she sang them to Elly Precious and found he liked them best; Evangeline knew. This method of helping promised to be valuable.

One day there were two little letters under the door.

"When he crys, he'll stop if you distrack him. Like this — *boo* — or make a cow-noise or a horse-noise, but it doesn't always work. Sometimes he keaps right on and then its no use to distrack him. Try tickleing unless tickleing is bad for measles."

This was a long note. Miss Theodosia did not smile this time because of the new sensitiveness in the region of her heart. When she read the second note, she held it a long time in her hand while something wet blistered it in spots.

"Please don't be mad if I worry a little

for fear Elly Precious will throw off his cloes. He's a dreadfull throw-offer, so we pin his sides to the cloesbasket but maybe you don't sleep him in a cloesbasket. I couldent sleep last night.

"P.S. With safety pins."

Sometimes they were cheerful little letters that peeped under the tight crack. Evangeline wrote the news to Elly Precious. That Stefana's washes came easier now and Carruthers was good all the time, only they never let him be steam whistles, of course. That they all missed Elly Precious and hoped that they'd be short measles and, mercy gracious, yes, they loved him, and Aunt Sarah was knitting again.

As the baby began to convalesce (they were short measles) and could sit up on Miss Theodosia's lap in front of the window, Evangeline's most important assistance began. For Elly Precious had very restless occasions and even Miss Theodosia's new skill failed always to "distrack" him.

Evangeline established a stage of action outside the biggest-paned, lowest-silled win-

dow, where vision was least obscured from within. On that stage she danced wild, long dances, varying with each performance. It was amazing how she varied them — sometimes bending and bowing tirelessly, sometimes evolving remarkable skirt dances from legs and toes and whirling petticoats. She grimaced unweariedly as long as Elly Precious would laugh at her faces. When he tired of those, she impersonated a cow — a horse — and made cow-noises and horse-noises at the top of her voice, to carry to Elly Precious.

Day after day she came, and they watched her from the big-paned window — the baby and Miss Theodosia. It was a great help to the measles.

"I never saw such a child!" Miss Theodosia said to the Reformed Doctor. "She never gets tired of doing it."

"Never was but one Evangeline — but she gets tired all right. Needn't tell me!"

"Then it's — love," Miss Theodosia said gently.

"It is," nodded he.

They had proceeded far in their acquaintance. Elly Precious had been so tiny a thing between them, as they ministered to him! It was not to be wondered at that they had drawn closer. After his professional "call," John Bradford fell into the way of lingering till she brought him tea.

"Talk about women loving tea!" she gibed gayly.

"Talk about it being the men that want three lumps!"

"That is queer, isn't it? We're the wrong way about; I like mine sweet and you don't want any sugar. We're the exceptions that prove the rule. If you'll hold Elly Precious a minute, I'll fill your cup."

"That will make three."

"'And I'll do it again, if you like — and again if you like!'" she quoted.

"Are you making stories now?" she asked him that day.

And he nodded gravely, "One — a love-story."

"Tell me about it! We want to hear it,

don't we, Elly Precious? We love love-stories."

"Not yet. Not till it is a little farther along." He set the third cup down untasted. His face, as Miss Theodosia looked smilingly at it across the baby's head, had grown grave. She wondered simply. Miss Theodosia was not making a love-story.

"Will you tell us about it when it's farther along? About the heroine and how she likes being in a love-story? Mercy gracious, it must be exciting!"

"If I can find out how she likes it," was his enigmatic answer. "She may not work out as I want her to. Heroines are women, you know."

"Well, of all things! If you can't make your heroine behave, I don't see who can!"

"I don't," he said slowly. "But I shall do my best."

Another day, she had something to show him, and she made a little mystery of it at first. She and Elly Precious knew! It was something sweet — it could be worn, but you seldom looked at it. It was soft

and hard, too. You could — kiss it! When it was empty you wanted to kiss it, and when it was full you had to!

"Show it to me!" he commanded; "think I can guess all that?"

She brought it and laid it in his hands, delighted like a girl.

"Feel of it — isn't it soft? And I never made one before, so it was hard! You seldom look at it, because it's worn in the dark. You'd like to kiss it now, it's so sweet, but when I put Elly Precious into it, you'll *have* to kiss it! There, didn't I tell you right?"

It was a little nightgown she had made for Elly Precious. He held it on his two big hands like something wonderful. Its little sleeves dangled over, and she caught one of them and squeezed it in a sort of soft ecstasy.

"It's so little!" she cried in a whisper. "Aren't you going to kiss it?"

"If you'll look away — I'm afraid to when you're looking."

"I won't look," she laughed. "You look, Elly Precious!"

The bath-times were the pleasantest to Miss Theodosia. Getting things together — little tub and powders and soaps and the fresh little clothes — was a beautiful beginning, and after that — after that, the deluge! The practice she had had washing that little ancient baby, in her former incarnation, stood Miss Theodosia in good stead! As she had bathed and rubbed and powdered her first baby eons ago, she bathed and rubbed and powdered this second one now. For she called Elly Precious her baby. That was their beautiful play.

"We'll keep it a secret, won't we? — just between you and me, dear! We won't even tell Evangeline that you're my darlin' dear," she crooned over this second baby. Elly Precious played the game; he was a little sport, was Elly Precious.

The morning after the little new-night-gown episode, the bath progressed thrillingly. That was, it seemed, the morning set by Elly Precious to give this new mother a glorious surprise. It could not be said that he had it up his little sleeve,

being innocent of any manner of garment, but he had it prepared.

Miss Theodosia dried the tiny body and set it far forward on her knees, facing her, and began as usual:

"Now, baby, watch — watch hard! Make exactly the same noise I do." She put her lips in position for clear enunciation.

"Mam —m-ma."

Customarily, Elly Precious sat and chuckled gleefully and nakedly. This was a favorite play. But, oh, to-day—

"Mum —mum," said Elly Precious distinctly. Miss Theodosia caught him to her, slippery and sweet, with a cry of rapture.

"You said it! You said it, Elly Precious — darlin' dear! Now I shall wrap you in a beautiful soft blanket and sing you a jiggy tune! Before I dress you in horrid, bothery sleeves, we'll rock, and rock, you and make-believe mum-mum!"

The big chair creaked delightsomely to the ears of Elly Precious. To its accompaniment sang Miss Theodosia.

"Darlin' Dear! Darlin' Dear, Mum-Mum's here — oh, Elly Precious, I shall send you to college! Of course, to college. You shall be a doctor —" Was that the chair creaking, or a door? It was a door. On the doorsill stood the Reformed Doctor, gazing in. The blanket had slipped away and it was a beautiful, bare Elly Precious in Miss Theodosia's arms, against her breast. The little picture stood out, distinct. But so soon it faded. She was on her feet and facing that treacherous doorway. Flames burned on her cheeks.

"Is it anything to be ashamed of to pretend he is my baby! Well, I've done it — I'm pretending now. We were having a beautiful time till —"

"Till I came."

"Till you came. You heard what I said about making a doctor of him, I suppose?"

He nodded. "I heard," he said meekly.

"But you didn't give me time to say it all. I was going to say he'd stay a doctor and not reform!" With which Parthian shot, delivered with spirit, Miss Theodosia

turned her back and Elly Precious' back to the intruder. What was left for him to do but retire, vanquished and diminished? The business of the bath went on, but joyless now. There was no further putting off of the horrid, bothery sleeves that Elly Precious abhorred. He set up indignant wails, and Miss Theodosia's soul wailed in unison.

"All our dear good time spoiled! We're not pretending any more; you're Evangeline's darlin' dear. I'll put you on the bed and give you your bottle." So abruptly had the beautiful game come to an end. Miss Theodosia went away to prepare the bottle. As she went, a glint of white underneath the door to out-of-doors caught her attention. Evangeline had not tucked it under as far as usual. Perhaps it was not unnatural, considering her new mood, that Miss Theodosia picked up the little letter almost impatiently.

"He says he can come home day after to-morrow if he don't colapse, so Stefana is cleaning the house and I'm helping and

we can't hardly wait. We've got a new cloesbasket Stefana's going to make bows for the handles, tell Elly Precious.

"P. S. Pink bows."

Miss Theodosia was not impatient as she folded the little letter again. Tears stood in her eyes. She hurried back, bottleless, to Elly Precious, to tell him. That he had fallen asleep made no difference.

"You are going home day after to-morrow! Dream it in a little dream, dear. When you wake up, it will be true. They can't hardly wait and there's a new 'cloesbasket' with bows — P. S., pink bows. Oh, Elly Precious, you know you're glad to go home! You've been pretending, too!" Game little Elly Precious, to pretend! She stooped and kissed his eyes, close shut in that dream of going home. "They are cleaning the house," she whispered, "they can't hardly wait."

A prescience of awful loneliness swept over her. She saw Theodosia Baxter — lone and babyless again — set back in her empty house. The curtain had gone

down — would go down day after to-morrow — on the last beautiful act.

"But I have two days left! I demand my pound — fifteen little pounds of flesh!" Elly Precious' little pink flesh. She would play that last act of the little game of make-believe. Intruders or no intruders, she would play it! At once, she began again where they had left off.

"You will have to go to college very young, dear," she said. "They are going to take you away from me day after to-morrow. A day and a half is such a little college course; you'd be such a little Freshman, Elly Precious! So we will have to give it up, dear. We'll just spend our last days together. Who wants to know Latin and Greek anyway? I'll teach you to pat little cakes in English!" Surely, surely she must have taught her first baby to pat-a-cake. The blundering little hands in hers felt strangely familiar. The first baby had been just as funny and sweet as Elly Precious at that little lesson.

"If I only had a little more time!" sighed

Miss Theodosia. "There is so much left for us to do; it is cruel to hurry us so! We might — we might run away, dear! You and I. To Europe and Asia and Africa! I'd show you all the wonders of the world. Listen, Elly Precious, — the *pyramids!* Wouldn't you love to see the pyramids? You could play in the warm sand, anyway, — bury your little twelve toes deep! We would keep watch all the time and *run* when we saw Evangeline coming. We would never stop to put on our shoes and stock — Elly Precious, you've gone to sleep!" So little was he thrilled at the prospect of pyramids.

Miss Theodosia rocked him gently in her arms. Perhaps she would rock him the whole day and a half — they could not prevent her! She would not stop rocking if twenty Reformed Doctors came and looked at her. She would rock in their faces!

A sudden and queer thought came to her of Cornelia Dunlap standing in the doorway, looking in as John Bradford had done.

She saw the wreck of Cornelia's plump calm — Cornelia's wide-eyed amazement. After she had reluctantly deposited the small, limp body upon the couch to finish out the nap, she got her writing materials and wrote to Cornelia Dunlap, with a whimsical little smile playing about her lips. Her pen moved fast across the sheet.

"The baby is having a beautiful nap. While he is asleep, I can write to you. Of course my time is limited — 'what with' scalding and filling bottles and giving little baths — Cornelia Dunlap, go and get a little baby and wash him! In a tub, with your sleeves rolled up. Let him splash the water into your face — over your dress — hear him laugh! Give him the soap for a little ship a-sailing. Oh, Cornelia, teach him to pat-a-cake! Get a baby with the measles if there's no other way. You will love him in between all his little measles. But, listen to me; *take this advice:* Don't let them take him back! Hold on to both his little hands. Run away to Africa with him if there is no other way — he will love

to play in the sand beside the pyramids. Send him to college, Cornelia, and I think — yes, make a doctor of him. Doctors are best.

"Morituri salutamus—we who are about to lose our babies and die wish you happiness with yours, is the free translation. *Hold on to yours.* He is a dear, I know. He may be as dear as mine, but he hasn't twelve toes!"

. . . . . .

"Mercy gracious!"

It was the two days later and it was Evangeline. The child's radiant face lighted up the room.

"He let me come! I promised Stefana I wouldn't kiss him till I got him home so's she could, too. He said to kiss his neck or behind his ears." As usual no confusion of personal pronouns troubled Evangeline.

"Mercy gracious! — oh, mercy gracious, he's improved! He's fatter! I never thought measles'd be fattenin'! You're glad to see me, aren't you, darlin' dear?

I'm Evangeline! I've come to take you home. We've got everything ready, only one bow, an' Stefana's piecin' that. Oh — my darlin' dear!"

The curtain had gone down. Theodosia Baxter stood quite alone in her big room. In her ears was suddenly the shriek of a steam whistle of welcome; it died away, and the silence ached. A crumpled something half under a chair caught her eye and she openly sobbed. It was a forgotten little nightgown.

"I'm going to Rome — I'm going to Paris — to Anywhere! I can't stand this!" she wailed. And then the creak of a door again.

He stood on the door-sill looking in.

CHAPTER V

"I'VE done it again!" came from the doorway repentantly, "but this time I knocked, honest to goodness. Regular bangs! You ought to have heard," his tone assuming an injured cadence.

Miss Theodosia had recovered herself. She was unfeignedly glad to see him this time.

"Maybe it was you, steam-whistling," she laughed. "I heard that! Oh, I am glad enough you came this time! You've saved me from a trip to Rome — tea is so much less expensive! I'll go and get it." She was off directly and back again in remarkably quick time with her little kettle and lamp. "Less time and fuss, too. See how little baggage! Now, Rome—"

"Don't mention Rome!" There was a deep note in John Bradford's voice. He watched her making the tea. Miss Theodosia's hands were worth watching.

"Speaking of steam whistles reminds me of ears," he said.

"Naturally! The two go together, all right!" But she saw that his face remained grave. "Oh! — you mean the steam-whistler's ears — I see."

"Yes, I have examined them rather carefully. They aren't hopeless little ears — not hopeless. I'm not ready to go any farther than that yet. But I intend — you see, I specialized in ears and a few other things at the University — in practice, too, before — before I reformed."

Quickly Miss Theodosia looked up.

"There! You are harking back; please don't hark back! It was mean in me to say it. I'm sorry! If I'd sent Elly Precious to college — while he was my baby — and given him a doctor's degree, he could have taken it or left it. He'd have had a right. Men have rights to their own lives."

"Sure," but John Bradford's tone was thoughtful rather than emphatic. "Still — I sometimes wonder —"

"Why? — tell me why!" Now she was

championing the Reformed Doctor! "You could do as you pleased, couldn't you? It was your own life you were 'reforming.' Still, I wonder, too. Tell me how it happened."

"How do I know how it happened?" He was walking up and down the room. "It was in my blood to write stories. I wrote them every chance I could get. Had to write them. I suppose I woke up to the rather decent conclusion that a man can't serve two masters and serve them well. Isn't efficient. So I chose my favorite master. There you have it in a nutshell. May I have mine in a teacup?"

She filled the dainty shell, but it rattled a little on its saucer. Miss Theodosia felt about for less moving things; she was strangely moved.

"How is the love story getting on?" she asked.

"The—oh! Well, it had a setback awhile ago. Setbacks are not good for love stories. But I shall go to work on it again."

"At once — to-day?" What was this

sudden freak of hers to drive him to work? — the work she had all but derided before.

"To-day. I'm working on it now — that is — er —"

"Before and after — tea," she smiled. "Well, I shall help you all I can on that story. I feel in a penitent mood. When you begin on it again —"

"I've begun on it again."

"After you go home, I mean. When you go to work again, make believe I'm David Copperfield's Dora — holding the pens!" Too late she saw her error and hedged. "Or cups of tea to keep up your strength."

"I like pens better. If Dora were there —"

"One more cup? You've only had one. The cups are no size at all. And while you drink it, tell me about your heroine. What have you named her?"

"Dora," he said promptly. "You see, you've helped already."

It was pleasant, drinking tea like this, with John Bradford there, opposite, hav-

ing his second cup. A pleasant way to drink tea — with a John! Miss Theodosia hugged herself happily. Even the forgotten little nightgown on the floor failed to diminish her content. She had not forgotten Elly Precious; she was merely making the most of the ameliorations the gods offered. The kind gods. But conscience had to put in its pious oar.

"I'm having a beautiful time; I don't know whether you are or not. But I'm going to send you back to that love story. I hope the Recording Angel will give me a white mark for it, or cross out a black one. The goodness of me! I've been sitting here trying to strangle my conscience, but you see it isn't my own — it's my grandmother's conscience; you have to respect your grandmother's conscience. You'll have to go."

"I can work on it here," he pleaded, but she shook her head mournfully.

"I haven't the materials. It takes special paper, doesn't it, and pens?"

"I could — er — think up my plot."

"With me talking a blue streak? I should talk a blue streak; that's my grandmother's, too. No, you must go. How will you ever get it done, if you don't?"

"I sha'n't if I do. Staying here is doing me good. I need to 'get up more strength.'"

She laughed, but remembered her grandmother. "No more tea," she said kindly. "Conscience! But I'll tell you — you may come back after you've worked."

"To-day?"

"To-morrow."

And for many to-morrows he came back. On one of them the talk once more reverted to the book that the Story Man was understood to be writing, in some mysterious Place of Pens and Paper.

"I hope it's a regular romance," Miss Theodosia said.

"Romance? What is that? Is there such a thing? There may have been once —"

Miss Theodosia's fair cheeks took on faint color. She turned upon him.

"Once nothing! I can't help it if that is

slang; the occasion demands slang. Are you trying to tell me romance is dead?"

He nodded. "Sterilized — Pasteurized — boiled out of us. I suppose," he sighed, "we are more hygienic, but we have faded in the process. It dulls romance to Pasteurize it."

She held up a staying hand.

"Please!" she said, "in words of one syllable and maybe you can convince me. But you can't. Do you mean to say there are no sweet, blushing girls left, with — with dreams?"

Again his sigh. It pained him to disillusion her.

"Not blushing ones. I tell you the color won't stand our modern sterilization process. I misdoubt the dreams, too. If they dream 'em, they're of independence and careers and votes; you wouldn't call those romantic dreams, would you? The little 'clinging vines'—" he waved them back into the past with a comprehensive sweep of his hand — "all gone. Our present-day soil is too invigorating, too stimulating.

The young things stand up on their own roots. No more clinging. Each one aspires to be a spunky little tree by herself. Look at 'em and see for yourself — the subways and elevateds are full of 'em at the crush hours, nights and mornings — all glorying in their independence — their fine, strong, young roots. No blushing, no clinging there! Are you convinced?"

"I am not," flashed Miss Theodosia gamely. "There must be one little dreamer of love dreams left."

"Show her to me."

"That isn't fair. I'm not in a way to know girls. I know just Stefana."

"And Evangeline."

"And Evangeline," laughed Miss Theodosia.

"Is she romantic?" demanded the Story Man. And there he had Miss Theodosia. She had instant vision of Evangeline growing, straight and thrifty already, on her own small roots. It was not possible to visualize a blushing — a clinging little Evangeline.

"She is still young," Miss Theodosia murmured. "Besides, she's one of a kind. There's only one Evangeline. You can't reason by only one of anything. The exception proves the rule."

"Then you yield me Evangeline?"

"Yes, you may have her on your side," conceded Miss Theodosia generously. It was rather in the way of a relief to shift the responsibility for Evangeline. Miss Theodosia suddenly bubbled into low laughter.

"She is going to be a plumber."

"Evangeline a plumber?"

"Yes, because she's got to be rich, she says. She's 'sick 'n' tired' of being poor, and you can make such *darlin'*, roary, snappy fires in a tin pail! Plumberin' will be fun."

He laughed a little, too, enjoyingly, but returned to his arguings. Said he:

"*Be* a plumber, not marry one, you see. What did I tell you? Oh, you have no monopoly on Evangelines! The woods are full of tame Evangelines, anyway. You will have to come over to my side."

"Not at all. I haven't given up my own side. I shall hold on a little while longer. I am not going to admit *yet* that all sentiment is dead and buried. And, anyhow, I don't see what it's being dead or alive has to do with your story. I thought authors were creators. Can't you create a little sentiment — romance? To my order?" she added demurely.

Replied the Story Man with grave eyes: "I shall do my best. We are a good deal at the mercy of our heroines. But I will do all that I can to win mine over, dear lady. Heaven knows I want to!"

"Then you are on my side now; you have changed your mind!" she cried tauntingly. "Woman, thy name is not Fickleness, it is thy husband's name! Well, I am glad it is going to be my kind of a story. How did I know but it was to be a historical novel or a problem story — ugh! And, instead, you're going to make love to your heroine in the dear old thrilly way."

He stirred in his seat, and his eyes sought his hostess. But Miss Theodosia's eyes

were cheerfully following the infinitesimal stitches with which she was rimming an infinitesimal round hole in the bit of linen in her hand.

"How far have you got?" she questioned over a new stitch.

"Not very far," sadly; "I think I am a little afraid of my heroine."

"Mercy gracious! Well, I think I'd take her by the ear and march her round to suit myself! If I wanted her to say 'yes'— do you want her to say 'yes'?"

Did he want her to say yes!

"I'm trying to lead her up to it," he said gently. Miss Theodosia bit off her thread.

"March her up to it, march her! You're too gentle with her. What is the use of being a Story Man? Might as well be a plumber like Evangeline!"

It was at this moment that Evangeline appeared on the little Flagg horizon. They saw her coming their way, loaded as usual with Elly Precious. The sag of her wiry little figure on the Elly Precious side appealed strongly to Miss Theodosia. She

dropped her foolish bit of linen and hurried to meet that little sag. When she came back with Elly Precious in her own arms, the Story Man was wandering away. He waved his hat to them smilingly.

"Please drop him — drop Elly Precious," Evangeline said, "anywheres *soft*. I don't want him to distrack your mind. You play with your dolly an' be a darlin' dear, Elly Precious, while we talk."

Very gently Evangeline subtracted Elly Precious from Miss Theodosia and removed him to an undisturbing distance. Then she returned and stood before Miss Theodosia.

"Stefana was born to-morrow," Evangeline stated gravely. "You didn't know, of course, nor neither did I till it kind of came out. I told him," nodding in the direction taken by the Story Man. "We plotted up a hatch — I mean we hatched up a plot. He said to talk it over with you. I don't know what he's goin' to do, but he'll do it — he said he would. An' I thought — I thought —" Unwonted hesi-

tations disturbed Evangeline's smooth flow of speech. She sat down suddenly.

"I guess I can say it easier sittin' than I could standin'. It's some hard to say — it's so kind of *bareheaded.* But I don't know what else to do. You see, Stefana'd hear me beatin' the eggs an' stirrin', if I did 'em at home. An' besides, it would fall — oh, mercy gracious, I know it would! I thought if I could do it over here —"

"Evangeline," Miss Theodosia said gently, "drop your voice at a period and begin all over with a capital letter. Take your time, dear."

Said Evangeline with a sigh: "I'll try standin' up. I guess I kind of mixed you up, didn't I? You see, what I *meant* was, could I make Stefana's birthday cake over here to your house where she can't hear me stirrin'?"

"Oh, Stefana's birthday! That is why she was 'born to-morrow.'"

"Yes'm, in a thunder storm. I've heard Mother tellin'. It will have to be a graham cake."

"A — what kind of cake, Evangeline? Maybe you'd better try sitting down; I don't think I just understand."

"No'm, no'm, I guess you wouldn't, because you probably can always 'ford white flour. I thought if I frosted it over real white, it would hide the grahamness. I've got two eggs."

Understanding came to Miss Theodosia, though a little slowly. Was she growing stupid?

"Evangeline, we'll make Stefana's cake together; we'll take turns 'stirrin''! We'll do it over here and keep it a beautiful secret."

The child was standing up now certainly, her wiry little body a-tilt with excitement, a-quiver with it. Evangeline's eyes shone.

"Oh, I knew you would! I knew you would! You're such a *nangel!* If you was a kind of folks that liked to be kissed —"

The soft pink of Miss Theodosia's cheeks! She lifted her head and sat very still.

"Come and try me, dear. Maybe I am

that kind of folks." And in a little whirlwind of tender gratitude descended Evangeline upon her. It was a whole-souled kiss, the only brand possible to Evangeline.

"I — I am that kind!" gasped Miss Theodosia, emerging laughing but tender-eyed. "Now let's begin the cake."

"Oh, yes, mercy gracious, yes! I'll go get the eggs 'n' graham flour, an'— an' molasses. Could we sweeten it with molasses, Miss Theodosia? It'll take all o' my sugar for the frostin'. We are pretty used to bein' sweetened with molasses —"

Miss Theodosia had a swift mental taste on her tongue of Stefana's graham birthday cake, molasses-sweet. There were her heartstrings at their odd little twitching again!

"You won't have to go home at all, Evangeline. I've got all the materials —" but at sight of the child's face, a little fallen and troubled, she hastily appended — "except the eggs. I guess you'd better go home and get those."

"Two!" sang Evangeline joyously, already on her way; "I've got two. Two's a lot of eggs, isn't it?"

They mixed and beat and stirred together, and Evangeline never knew how many more eggs than two went into the rich golden batter. Elly Precious, tied for safety-first into one of Miss Theodosia's chairs, looked on with an interest more or less intermittent; when Evangeline's offerings of "teeny speckles" of toothsome batter were delayed, the interest flagged. The baking time was for Evangeline a period of utmost anxiety — there were so many direful things that might happen to Stefana's cake. If it fell down or burned up —

"Oh!" she breathed with infinite relief when the strain was over, and only lovely things had happened to the cake, "I'm so happy I could sing if I had any vocal strings! That's queer about me, isn't it? I don't have any trouble with my *talkin'* strings."

"Not a bit," agreed Miss Theodosia

gayly. "What makes you think you couldn't sing?"

"Because once I tried to sing Elly Precious to sleep an' it woke him up, awfully up. He was scared. So I always talk him to sleep. Miss Theodosia, don't birthday cakes sometimes have candles round the edge of 'em? I don't mean Stefana's, of course, but rich folks' birthday cakes."

"*I* mean Stefana's. Evangeline, we'll have thirteen candles!" but inwardly she was wondering if forty would not fit better round the edge of aged little Stefana's birthday cake. "And we'll decorate it — write something on the top, you know. We'll make the Story Man do it for us."

Evangeline was awed into near-silence. "You mean — poetry? Mercy gracious, poetry!"

"Something lovely," nodded Miss Theodosia a little vaguely. If it be poetry, the Story Man must do that part, too. A little later, when Evangeline had shouldered Elly Precious and departed and the Story Man had sauntered again into sight, she

hailed him with relief. Displaying the snowy little cake, she explained the situation.

"You must do the rest. We want a 'sentiment' on it, Evangeline and I. What is the use of being a literary person if you cannot inscribe a birthday cake?"

He groaned a little, reminiscently. He remembered the autograph albums of his bashful youth. How much better than an autograph album was a frosted cake?

"Something appropriate, you know," encouraged Miss Theodosia, brightly. "In lovely pink writing on top."

"'She hath starched what she could,'" he offered tentatively.

"Oh, for shame! Something nice and romantic."

"But romance is dead — hold on, I beg pardon! That is not decided yet; I remember. You shall have your poetry, you and Evangeline. Something after this wise:

"'Our most esteemed Stefana,
May rough winds never pain her'

"Do winds 'pain' people? But, to speak modestly, I call that a pretty neat sentiment to turn out extempo like that. 'Stefana' — you can't deny Stefana is a hard word to rhyme with. Now tell me a harder one!"

"Evangeline — Theodosia," she murmured. Her eyes dwelt lovingly on the little white cake. He should not make fun of it!

"I'll decorate it myself," she said, "I'll have a little pink heart on it — *two* little pink hearts."

"With but a single thought. Make them with but a single thought — beat them as one. There! I'm perfectly sober and sane now. It's a fine little cake, and I'm not worthy to write poetry for it. Longfellow — Shakespeare — Whitcomb Riley — we'll canvass them. Don't think I'm not respectful to Stefana's birthday."

"I don't know what you call respect!" she retorted. But she knew the next day. She found out what he called respect. The knowledge came, as so much that was

worth while came, through Evangeline, Elly Precious in its wake. They came running this time. Elly Precious' small body rolled and lurched with their hurry and the agitation of Evangeline's soul.

"Somethin's — happened."

"Give me the baby. Sit down, dear. Now."

"The flower wagon brought Stefana — roses," whispered Evangeline. "In a long box — an' tissue paper. Oh, my mercy gracious, stopped right straight at our house! An' nobody dead." Evangeline's whisper rose to a weird little cry. The wonder of the flower wagon stopping right straight! And every one alive!

"Stefana's countin' 'em. I guess she's counted 'em a hundred times. They's — thirteen! They've got the longest stems you ever *saw!* Stefana can't get over their stems; she said they most made her cry."

For very breath Evangeline stopped. Over the little uneasy head of Elly Precious shone Miss Theodosia's eyes. Miss Theo-

dosia was softly thrilled. The stems appealed, too, to her; she loved them long — long.

"Roses, you say? Oh, Evangeline! Birthday roses for Stefana! What color?"

"Red — red — red," chanted Evangeline. "Thirteen red roses an' thirteen long stems. In a pasteboard box with 'Miss Stefana Flagg' wrote on it. You ought to seen how Miss Stefana Flagg looked! She — she kissed the box. I guess now she's kissin' the roses. She never 'xpected to have any *roses* till she was dead. An' then she couldn't 've kissed 'em an' cried at the stems," added Evangeline softly. She was suddenly a softened little Evangeline, curiously gentled by Stefana's sweet, red roses. Miss Theodosia caught her breath at the sight of the child's face and the thought of Stefana kissing her roses.

"I wish — I wish you'd go over an' congratcherlate Stefana," whispered Evangeline. "She'd be so tickled. I'll keep Elly Precious over here, an' Carruthers is playin' ball in a field." As though this ceremony

of 'congratcherlation' demanded quiet and privacy.

And by and by Miss Theodosia went. She had a whimsical impulse to carry her little silver card case, but she did not yield to the whimsey. She did take off her little white apron and smoothe her hair. Stefana to-day was a person for ceremonies and respect. Oh, the kindness, the dearness of those long-stemmed roses! She had not thought to do it herself, but he — a man creature — Miss Theodosia's eyes were tender.

Stefana was still sitting among her roses. They lay across her lap.

"Oh! Oh, come right in, Miss Theodosia!" she cried welcomingly. "But please to excuse me for not getting up — I can't bear to disturb them. Seems as if I could sit right straight in this chair till they withered! I'm breathing easy so not to breathe the smell out. I never had any roses before."

Her voice lowered to almost a whisper. She whispered a little laugh.

"Seems as if I'd ought to be married while I have 'em! They're such beautiful roses to be married in!"

And this was Stefana, their matter-of-fact, starchy little white-washer! This rapt, dreamy little face was Stefana's face!

"Sometimes," Stefana murmured, "sometimes I've dreampt —" but Miss Theodosia did not quite catch what it was Stefana had sometimes "dreampt," but it was something sweet. Stefana a little dreamer of sweet dreams! One of them must have been a rose-dream, and this was that dream come true.

The call of congratulation was a brief one. It seemed little short of irreverence to have seen at all that picture of Stefana rocking her roses in the little wooden rocker. Miss Theodosia slipped away with it hung on the walls of her mind — she would never take it down.

John Bradford was coming along the road and she went a little way to meet him. Some of Stefana's radiance was in her own face.

"I've found it," she announced in soft triumph.

"Good!" he hazarded at random. It was always good to find things. But he wondered at the radiance.

"My romance that I knew was somewhere. I've found it! I told you so!"

"Found it where?" he demanded. He was unconsciously stirred by her emotion. He followed her glance to the little House of Flaggs. "Not — there?"

"Yes, there. Stefana is dreaming it over a lapful of red roses. I have been there and seen her. Is romance dead — is it? Go and look at Stefana!" But she held him back from going. "No, no, I didn't mean it! Not in cold blood — I didn't go in cold blood. You will have to take my word for it."

"I will take your word."

"That romance is not dead?"

"That romance is alive. But who would have thought of it's being *Stefana!*"

"Who would have thought!" echoed Miss Theodosia.

Elly Precious was fretting restlessly when she got back. The children were on the porch.

"Nothing's the matter with him," Evangeline explained, "unless it's because he's a-goin' to be taken. I told him he was. It is kind of scaring to be taken. I feel kind of that way, too."

"Taken where?"

"Not anywhere — just *taken*. His picture an' mine an' Carruthers'— we're all goin' to be taken now, pretty soon. I must go home an' prink Elly Precious an' Carruthers. You see, Mr. Bradford promised to take Stefana because it's her birthday, an' first we knew he said he'd take all o' us! He's got a camora. That's him now! I guess he's waitin' for Elly Precious an' me."

She was hurrying away, but bethought herself of something. "The cake!" she said. "If Elly Precious'll be still, I can carry it on my other arm. Maybe we'll be so busy being taken that I can't come over again before supper."

"Run along," Miss Theodosia said; "I'll take it over. I haven't quite got it ready yet," for there were the two little pink hearts to add, — Stefana's heart and a little dream-heart. She smiled tenderly over the fashioning of those little pink hearts. Miss Theodosia was not an artist — they wavered and leaned, but they leaned toward each other! Perhaps they were better to be little leaning hearts.

She carried the cake over, covered with a napkin. There were other things, too, that she had prepared, and several trips were necessary. A mold of quivering, scarlet jelly, full of fascinating glints of light; scalloped, currant-rich cookies, a little platter of cold chicken — Miss Theodosia carried them all over covered with napkins.

Evangeline was putting the finishing touches to the supper-table, which was brave with the best Flagg dishes. It was rather a pitiful little bravery, but satisfying to Evangeline. She hurried Miss Theodosia aside and talked very fast.

"I've sent Stefana out with Elly Precious. We're goin' to blind her an' lead her in an' count one — two — *look!* She'll see the cake the very quickest thing! She won't cut off an inch o' the stems, so they're kind of tall up 'n' down, you see. I mean the roses. I've put a corset steel o' Mother's in an' kind of tied 'em to it. I hope you don't see any corset steel."

"No." Miss Theodosia looked not at the centerpiece of roses but at the cake, the tremulous jelly, the platter, — anywhere else. "No, I don't see any, dear."

"It's perfectly lovely, isn't it? Mercy gracious — oh, mercy gracious! It'll *dazzle* Stefana. An' most every speck you did, Miss Theodosia. Won't you please stay? Won't you *please* to please?"

"No," for the sixth time persisted Miss Theodosia. "I'm going before Stefana gets back. This is a Flagg celebration, dear. Just little Flaggs."

Evangeline drew a long breath. Then little twinkles lighted in her eyes.

"Well," she said, "they'll be star-spangled Flaggs to-night!"

She followed Miss Theodosia to the door. Even then she could not stop talking. Her excited little voice followed Miss Theodosia home.

"He took us! He's blue-printing us to see if we wiggled. Elly Precious did — mercy gracious! But maybe one of him, just one, didn't. He's goin' to make reg'lar black an' white pictures of the unwiggled ones. I guess you'll be surprised when you see us!"

She was surprised. John Bradford brought the little blue pictures to her the next day. They bent over them together.

"Oh!" Miss Theodosia uttered softly, for the pictures were instantly tangled in her heartstrings. She could hardly bear the one unwiggled one of Elly Precious. He was draped in tall red roses; they covered his little body and trailed their stems about his outspread legs. He had the effect of peeping at Miss Theodosia

through roses. But what she could see of him was Elly Precious — her baby.

"Stefana posed him," the Story Man said, smilingly. "And Evangeline and Carruthers, too. Look at Evangeline."

Across Evangeline trailed the roses. It was a rigid, terribly rigid, Evangeline, but the roses saved her. Some softening grace emanated from them and touched the solemn little face. A little more of Evangeline than of Elly Precious peeped from behind them.

"Carruthers! — et, tu, Carruthers!" murmured Miss Theodosia. For here again was the trail of the roses. Stefana had "posed" them in all the little pictures. The effect of a rose-draped Carruthers was almost startling. He gazed from behind them stolidly, unsmiling and unhappy-souled. Carruthers did not enjoy being taken.

"Now look at Stefana," John Bradford said. This was his special exhibit — exhibit S. He watched Miss Theodosia's face as she glanced at the little blue print.

No roses trailing there. Just a radiant-

faced Stefana gazing at Miss Theodosia. It was the same face that hung on the walls of her memory. Miss Theodosia had the sense of roses there, out of sight; it was as if Stefana rocked them gently in her lap.

"She wouldn't wear the flowers herself," the Story Man was saying; "Neither Evangeline nor I could make her. Queer little freak."

"She is wearing them!" smiled Miss Theodosia, "I can see them. It's only because you are a man that you can't see, — you and Evangeline! Look at the roses in Stefana's eyes — in her soul —"

"Oh, you woman! Women are curious things."

"Women are romantic things — oh, you man! Why should you understand us Stefanas with your unsentimental soul-of-a-man? What do you know about our dreams?" She had not meant to say quite that. "Stefana's dreams," she corrected herself. "What do you know about them? And still —"

Miss Theodosia looked up from the radiant little face of Stefana with her dream-roses to the man-face beside her own.

"And still — you sent the roses," she said softly.

CHAPTER VI

A LETTER came to Miss Theodosia one day. Queer how disturbing a letter could be when for so long peace had enveloped her travel-worn spirit, though it might have been because of the peace that she was disturbed. Ordinarily a letter from Cornelia Dunlap was the forerunner of interesting events to break the monotony of life. But life was not monotonous now, and it presented interesting events without the intervention — mentally and unkindly Miss Theodosia termed it interference — of Cornelia Dunlap.

"Why need Cornelia write me now, or if she does write, why can't she talk about mushrooms?" which were Cornelia's most recent palliative to her self-imposed and brief sojourns in her little home town. It had been cats when she and Miss Theodosia returned from Spain, Belgian hares

after their long stay in Egypt. Miss Theodosia herself had never tried mushrooms nor Belgian hares. She had borne her short homecomings unpalliated, and had flitted again relievedly. Usually she and Cornelia Dunlap had flitted together. They had formed the flitting habit when family bereavements had left them both lonely women.

"Why must she write about Japan?" sighed Miss Theodosia now, over the disturbing letter. "What do I care about Japan?" Yet she always had cared about Japan. Cornelia Dunlap and she had left that delectable country of cherry blossoms and quaint, kimona-ed women for their old age, they said, to help them bear it. But Cornelia had forgotten that.

"Let's go to Japan," she wrote. "I can pack in twenty-four hours; how long will it take you? We'll stay there till cherry blossom time. Frankly, Theodosia Baxter, I am bored, and you needn't tell me that you aren't — frankly — too. You haven't even mushrooms (they didn't earn their own liv-

ing, my dear. I don't know what the trouble was). 'My native country, thee,' — I love it. I tell you I do! You know yourself that I never stay overnight in a place without unfurling my country's flag. Remember in sunny Italy? — the little brown bambino that cheered my colors? But I love my country best — in Japan! Come, dear, pack — pack! If I can leave my mushrooms, I guess you can leave your lonesome, big house in Nowhere."

Miss Theodosia dreamed a little over her letter, of the little island of romance and flowers and fans. They did not need to wait; they could go again when they were old.

She told John Bradford at their next meeting of the lure of Japan, though in her heart she was not lured. She was not "bored"; it was not a big, lonesome house in Nowhere! She would tell Cornelia Dunlap so. She would tell her that Flaggs were better than mushrooms — they earned their own living! Cornelia could run away alone to Japan to her cherry blossoms.

But John Bradford had his scare, and through him Evangeline hers. Gloom settled on Evangeline. If her beloved lady was going away — the bitter, bitter taste of life without the beloved lady! But the inspiration that flashed into Evangeline's nimble mind temporarily comforted her. She set about its carrying-out. Inspirations were sweet morsels under Evangeline's tongue.

To Miss Theodosia on her porch, telling Cornelia Dunlap that Japan had no lure, came a solemn procession across the grass. Evangeline led, with the effect of walking backward — though she walked straight ahead — and waving a baton. Stefana had Elly Precious, and Carruthers tramped soberly behind, in time to that imaginary wand. Miss Theodosia's fascinated gaze was riveted to the procession's arms. The wonder grew with nearness. Every individual parader in the procession wore a somber black arm-band. Elly Precious held his small member straight out from his side as if a little afraid of it.

"Evangeline!" uttered Miss Theodosia. It did not occur to her to address any one but Evangeline. Instinctively she recognized that the procession was Evangeline.

"Halt!" with an imaginary flourish. "Right about your faces!" Then Evangeline turned to Miss Theodosia and offered her sad little explanation.

"We're in mournin'," she said. "All of us are — on our sleeves. Elly Precious's doesn't stay on very well."

"Evangeline!" again cried Miss Theodosia, this time in a startled voice. Fears beset her. Was it the mother, or had poor Aunt Sarah raveled out? How could it have happened so suddenly — a bolt out of the clear little Flagg skies?

"It's you," Evangeline said. Miss Theodosia settled a little in her chair and waited. In time — Evangeline's time — she would know. Elly Precious held out his rigid little mourning arm and softly whimpered.

"Give him to me, Stefana; he wants to

come to me," Miss Theodosia said, extending welcoming hands. Very gently she relieved the tension of the small arm.

"We're in mournin' for you," Evangeline explained sadly. "*He* said we might as well make up our minds. I tied a stockin' round his arm, but he took it off again because he said he didn't wear his stockin's — no, I guess it wasn't his stockin's; it was his heart — on his sleeves. But he said he was in mournin', too."

Miss Theodosia gave it up. She appealed to Stefana in gentle despair.

"You tell me, dear. What does she mean?"

"We're so sorry you are going to Japan, and Evangeline said we ought to go into mourning, so we went," explained the quiet Stefana.

"She cried; you know you did, Stefana Flagg! I would've, only I was gettin' the mournin' ready. I'm *goin'* to."

"Don't cry!" Miss Theodosia said, though she was doing it herself. The pulling of her heartstrings! "Don't cry, Evan-

geline dear. I wish we could take back Stefana's tears."

"You mean — you ain't goin'?"

"I ain't goin'," repeated Miss Theodosia, tremulously smiling. "Japan! I wouldn't go to *six* Japans!"

"Then take it off o' our arms, quick! You take off Carruthers', Stefana. I'll undo Elly Precious's. Oh, goody! Oh, mercy gracious, I feel 's if we ought to take hold o' hands an' — an' *wave!*"

At the end of her letter to Cornelia Dunlap Miss Theodosia wrote: "You can't tempt me with all your cherry blossoms. I've got home, Cornelia, and all my little Flaggs are waving. Come and see *my* Flaggs."

It was mid-September and Miss Theodosia found out-of-doors a pleasant place to be. She had made an errand down to the business portion of the little town for the sheer pleasure of the going and coming, — a morning errand, as the afternoons were sacred to tea, — and now was coming

leisurely back, sniffing the sun-sweet air. She turned off the quiet, side street she had been using as a long way home, into the main street of the town, only to find her progress interrupted by unseemly and noisy crowds. Miss Theodosia loved all things seemly and quiet. How she despised a crowd, and this one — she brought up short in actual disgust on the outer edge of it. Thus was her stately little progress stayed. People surged about her and jostled her good-naturedly. She was in the crowd.

"What is it? Has there been an accident?" she inquired of the nearest jostler. It was a ragged and radiant child.

"Axident! Didn't ye know there was a circus? We're waitin' for the p'rade. I hear it! I hear it comin'!"

The crowd surged ahead toward the street curb. Against her will, Miss Theodosia surged, too. Loud cries filled her ears — ecstatic cries of little children. Down the usually quiet street marched, in all its brilliancy of color and tinsel and tawdry

splendor, the street parade. Horses curvetted, elephants patiently plodded, huge cars of mystery swung by; clowns smirked, to the riotous joy of that awful crowd.

"See him sittin' tail to! That one there — there!"

"Look-a that one with the spotted panth! Look at him throw kitheth!"

"They's man-eatin' lions in that cage — see the lady sittin' with 'em!"

"See that man top o' the band waggin that shoots up his neck *yards* — quick! See him shorten it again!"

Miss Theodosia saw all, against her will. All her thirty-six years she had held aside her dainty skirts from people who went to circuses, but how could she hold them aside now? There was not room. She was caught in the swirl and noise and glee.

Suddenly a familiar voice struck her ear. Evangeline's voice! Drawn up on the curbing in a vantage-spot that only they who come early and patiently wait can secure, was the entire family of little Flaggs. At a new angle Miss Theodosia was able to see

plainly their breathless ecstasy. She could hear what Evangeline was saying.

"Oh, isn't it elegant — oh, look, Stefana! Oh, don't you hope circuses'll be free in Heaven — not jus' the p'rade, but the show!"

Then and there Miss Theodosia's heartstrings throbbed unmercifully; she could not do anything with them; they would throb. In vain she turned away — looked at other faces — listened to other voices. It was Evangeline she heard, with her wistful cry, and the little line of Flaggs that she saw.

"There's Miss Theodosia — there, there, Stefana! She's come to the p'rade!"

"Miss Theodosia! Miss Theodosia! Look, Elly Precious, quick!" And it was Elly Precious she saw, held high by eager arms. That minute she yielded to the wild impulse within. She pressed forward to speaking distance.

"Who will go to the show with me this afternoon? All in favor say aye."

"Mercy gracious, you don't honest mean —"

"Miss Theodosia!" Stefana's lean little face actually whitened.

"I honest mean. Isn't anybody going to say aye?"

"I!"

"I!"

"I!"

The joyous chorus of "I's"! The jubilant waving of every little Flagg! For the moment, the gorgeous tinseled parade was forgotten in the vaster anticipative glories of the show. Miss Theodosia's heartstrings throbbed a little louder but tunefully. She had forgotten her skirts.

Shows begin early and last long. Miss Theodosia's show began at the opening of the gates. She and her little string of followers filed in.

"Mercy gracious!" breathed Evangeline in awesome delight at the vision spread before her.

"Mercy gracious!" breathed Miss Theodosia. They were different mercy graciouses. But a miracle was on the way to her, coming straight and fast through the

crowds of festive circus-goers. Very soon now — in an hour — in another moment — It arrived! Miss Theodosia felt herself yielding to the lure of the sawdust and the side shows — the pink lemonade and the balloons. She was entering in! She was not Miss Theodosia who detested crowds; in the tight grip of the miracle, she was Miss Theodosia who thrilled and enjoyed.

"Isn't it elegant? Oh, aren't you happy!" cried Evangeline.

"Aren't I!" gallant Miss Theodosia responded. She caught Evangeline's sleeve. "What is that man shouting about — there, in front of that big tent?"

"Oh, I don't know, but it's somethin' splendid. I know it's somethin' splendid! I'll go 'n' see."

"I'll go with you. Stefana, stay with the rest of the children. We'll be right back." Miss Theodosia laughed as she and Evangeline went, hand in hand. In a moment they were back for the rest. It was "somethin' splendid"— come! come!

They drank pink lemonade and ate ice-

cream cones. Elly Precious and Carruthers waved gay balloons. Evangeline chose a cane.

"I need one. I'm so happy I tumble over! I never was so happy 'xcept when Elly Precious stopped havin' the measles. That was as splendid as this, but it wasn't as *splendid* splendid. Miss Theodosia, don't you feel all beautiful and jiggy inside?"

"All beautiful and jiggy!" nodded Miss Theodosia, wondering a little whether it was all circus or some pink lemonade.

"I like the wholeness of it best," Stefana said, taking in the animated scene with an artist's eye.

"I don't! I like the every little speckness of it," Evangeline chirped. "I like that 'normous big tent an' that tiny little one — I like that balloon man — I like that little darky baby — isn't he black as the ace of space, Miss Theodosia! Oh, I like every blade o' — sawdust!" Her laugh trilled out gayly.

"But we haven't seen it yet — the show."

"Miss Theodosia! You don't honest

mean we're goin' in? Stefana, she does — she means! We're goin' in!" As of course they were. The best seats in the great tented arena were none too good for them. Stefana laboriously shut up Elly Precious' go-cart, and Miss Theodosia lifted Elly Precious in her arms. In the procession they sought those best-of-all seats. What followed, even Evangeline gazed upon in silence; there were no words in Evangeline's dictionary for what followed. She sat on the edge of the best-of-all seat and drank in riders and clowns and dizzy performing fairies — an intoxicating draught.

"Miss Theodosia," in a tiny whisper.

"Yes, dear?"

"Ain't you glad you ain't dead? 'Cause you don't need to be." Which was Evangeline's way of complimenting Heaven. There was no need of dying to find out its marvels — not now. Miss Theodosia slipped one of the small hands into hers and squeezed it; squeezing established understanding. They knew — they understood.

"Well, upon my word!" a deep voice

exclaimed behind them. With one accord Miss Theodosia and her Flaggs wheeled about. The Tract Man — Shadow Man — Reformed Doctor stood there, smiling. He was eating popcorn from a paper bag. Transferring the bag to Evangeline, he held out his hands for the baby.

"You here?" Miss Theodosia exclaimed stupidly.

"Yes — are you?"

Every one laughed. Laughing was so easy! Elly Precious from his lofty shoulder-post clapped small, joyous hands and crowed. In the ring a clown threw them kisses. A fairy in short, silvery skirts rode by on two horses.

"Wait! Watch her — watch her!" Evangeline whispered hissingly. "She's goin' to jump through a hoop o' fire! Without burnin' up!"

John Bradford leaned forward to Miss Theodosia.

"Having a good time?" he whispered.

"Grand! Are you?"

"Hunkydory!" He might have been a

boy, she a girl. These might have been little Flagg brothers — sisters.

"We must have cones — ice-cream cones," he said.

"We've had 'em," piped Evangeline.

"We must have more cones, and crackerjack."

"We've had crackerjack."

"We must have more crackerjack. Where is the Crackerjack Boy?"

At the end of the show in the ring they took a vote and decided to stay to see it all over again. What did it matter if they had seen the tinsel fairy jump through her fiery hoop or the acrobats perform their wonders? They felt acquainted now. They were gazing, enchanted, at friends.

"My clown's lookin' at me! I'm goin' to bow to him."

"Mine's threw me a kiss!"

Stefana, more refined in taste, had adopted a beauteous creature in gold and blue, and starry spangles. Her beauteous lady waved a scepter at her as she glided by.

"She's got so many ruffles on! An'

they're beau-ti-fully done up!" sighed Stefana in gentle envy of some unknown artist in starch.

"Now what?" demanded the man of the party at length. "Anybody want to stay here any longer? Or shall we discover new territory?" He took Evangeline aside and questioned her.

"Have you seen everything out there?" indicating the attractions without the big tent.

"We've seen a nawful lot. We've had a nelegant time," Evangeline whispered back. Desire and loyalty to Miss Theodosia fought a duel in her small breast and the issue was yet doubtful.

"Isn't there something left that you'd like to see?" The order was changed; here was man tempting woman. Desire won the duel with one mighty blow. Evangeline tiptoed up as near his ear as possible and breathed two words.

John Bradford turned to the little crowd.

"We'll go to see the Fat Lady," he said to Miss Theodosia; "I'll take the

kiddies, while you sit down somewhere and rest."

"Sit down somewhere? Haven't I been sitting down somewhere? Don't you suppose I want to see the Fat Lady, too?" laughed Miss Theodosia. Fat ladies appealed to her invitingly, in this remarkable mood of hers — Miss Theodosia's circus mood.

"You're playing the game like a trump! I didn't dream you could 'pretend' a circus was yours. Must be some harder than pretending babies —" John Bradford got no farther. She turned indignant eyes upon him.

"'Game' — 'pretend' — I'd have you know I'm having a nelegant time! You must be the Pretender."

"Me? I'm having the time of my life! I am going to put a circus into my love story."

"This circus?"

"This identical one."

"With me and the little Flaggs in it?"

"You — and the little Flaggs."

They had fallen behind the children, and a side eddy of the crowd had flowed between. The Fat Lady was at the further end of the grounds, but there was no hurry; she would remain just as fat a Fat Lady if they pleasantly dallied a little. Stefana had, with the deftness of genius-born skill, solved the puzzle of opening the folded-up go-cart, and the Man Person of the party was no longer burdened with Elly Precious.

Suddenly into the pleasant dallying leaped Carruthers with terrified little face.

"They're lost! We can't find 'em! I can't an' Stefana can't. They ain't anywhere! We were lookin' at a man with turkles you wind up, an' when we stopped lookin' they weren't there — not anywhere. They ain't anywhere! Not any —'

"Stop him!" begged Miss Theodosia. "He'll keep right on anywhere-ing. We must find Stefana."

"Stefana said — oh, I couldn't hear what Stefana said, but she pointed an' pointed, an' I came lickety. They're lost! They ain't anywhere!"

Stefana appearing here, the story was repeated. Like that — Stefana snapped her fingers — they had disappeared.

"I've hunted and hunted. Everybody's seen children with go-carts, but they weren't Evangeline 'n' Elly Precious."

Miss Theodosia's own face was pale, but she achieved a light laugh.

"No wonder you haven't found them yet! In this crowd. It takes time; — you tell them to be patient and we'll find the right go-cart." She appealed to the Man Person.

"Sure, we'll find the right go-cart! Where do you think they could have vanished? Down a hole in the ground?"

Miss Theodosia clapped her hands valiantly. "That's it! Evangeline found a hole and took Elly Precious down, to show him the White Rabbit and the Red Queen! Evangeline would love to be an Alice in Wonderland. Go and find the hole," to the Man Person. "I'll stay right in this spot with the children. See, in front of this ice-cream tent."

"Good idea! — I'll bring them back with me unless you find them first."

But they were not with him when he returned half an hour later. In spite of himself, he looked anxious.

"Queer thing! What color dress did she have on? I've tried to remember."

"Pink — oh, pink!" sobbed Stefana, "but it was most washed out. It had two tucks let down, an' it was limpy in the skirt, behind — the starch gave out." There were so many Evangelines, but it didn't seem as if there'd be another Evangeline limpy behind! "An' Elly Precious's lower teeth are through, and his shoes are buttoned inside, I remember now! We were in such a hurry — there wouldn't be another baby buttoned inside."

After still further vain hunting, John Bradford sent the three home.

"You may find Evangeline there, getting supper!" he said, "but I'll stay here on the chance you don't. I'll investigate every hole on the grounds! Don't anybody worry — now, mind! There's nothing to worry about."

"Fat Lady!" Miss Theodosia suddenly exclaimed as one with inspiration. "We've never thought of her; that's where they've gone! Evangeline couldn't wait. She had some pennies."

"I've investigated the Fat Lady — no good. They don't let go-carts in, and there weren't any outside. But, of course, I can go the whole figure, to make sure. I'll go all the whole figures. Can't you trust me?"

"We can. Come, children. I'll coach you on Wonderland, so if Evangeline is there you'll know what she is seeing! Gryphons, Mock 'Turkles,' Mad Hatters — a circus within a circus! It's so much like Evangeline to find that White Rabbit hole!" Miss Theodosia clung determinedly to a cheerful view of the situation. But, secretly, she worried. As the time went on, she worried harder. Two babies — one wheeling the other! What was Evangeline but a baby?

Miss Theodosia took the two little surviving Flaggs to her own home and plied

them with goodies — many goodies. She unearthed from hiding-places candied ginger and guava jelly; she invented toys for the deaf little Flagg and occupations for Stefana. She found a dog-eared copy of "Alice," dear to her own childhood, and read to Stefana — anything to occupy the waiting. It was long waiting!

It grew dark. Once Miss Theodosia heard heavy steps trying painstakingly to be light ones. She found the Man Person outside the door.

"Nothing yet? You haven't any trace —" It was needless asking.

"You don't think — "

"Of course, I don't think! Nothing on earth could happen to those kiddies."

"Automobiles — "

"Aren't allowed on the grounds, and you couldn't have got Evangeline off the grounds with a tackle and falls. I know what I think."

"Then tell it — mercy gracious!"

"I think it's Evangeline that's happened. Mark my words! Now I'm going back

again. I just came to — I suppose I thought I was coming to relieve your mind!" He laughed sorrily and softly.

"Oh, go — yes, go! It's — it's long past Elly Precious' bedtime." He could hear soft sobbing as he went away. Miss Theodosia was mourning for her baby. The Man Person's throat tightened; he broke into a run.

Stefana met Miss Theodosia at an inner door. She had her hat on and Carruthers by the hand.

"I'm going home to put him to bed. I — I shan't look at the clothes basket. But if Elly Precious is dead, I'll put wh-white ribbons on the h-handles!" With a moan, Stefana threw herself into the kind arms of Elly Precious' friend who loved him, too!

"Hush, dear! Elly Precious isn't dead, but I hope he is asleep. Evangeline, I know, will take care of him. Let's trust Evangeline."

"Maybe she's dead, too!"

"Stefana! I'm disappointed. I thought you were a brave girl."

"I am!" sobbed Stefana, gathering herself together. Miss Theodosia watched her go quietly away, hand in hand with the little brother that was left. But Miss Theodosia was no longer brave. Sudden terrors seized upon her. She remembered how round and white Elly Precious was — how he showed the little teeth that had got through — how he had loved to watch Evangeline dance, through the window.

"Theodosia Baxter, I'm disappointed! I thought you were a brave girl."

As she stood in the moist darkness, a sound came to her — too soft for a man-sound. It grew a very little more distinct.

"Miss Theodosia — sh! he's gettin' ready to go off. I want him to go off soon's I get him home — I don't want to 'xcite him. I jus' came to tell you —"

"Evangeline! Have you got him there?"

The softest of giggles. "Why, of course! He's too valuable to leave anywheres. Leave a Best Baby! That's the s'prise! He's a prize baby, Elly Precious is! I've got it in my pocket!"

CHAPTER VII

"I'VE got to take him home an' bed him down!" Horsey little Evangeline! "Then I'll come back an' show it to you. Isn't it puffectly elegant that he took a prize! We've had the best time!" And in the darkness Miss Theodosia heard soft, retreating steps and the faintest creak of wheels. Left alone, she leaned for support on the porch pillar, overcome by the Evangelineness of Evangeline. And they had all had so far from the "best time" — they had suffered so!

"Mercy gracious!" sighed Miss Theodosia weakly, but aloud.

"What did I tell you?" The Man Person's voice! What kind of a ghostly night was this? "Didn't I say it was Evangeline that had happened, 'mark my words'? Well, wasn't it?"

"Tell me instantly how she 'happened'! I'm all in the dark."

"Same here. Can't see an inch before my nose. If we had a lamp —"

"Didn't she tell you? Didn't she come home with you?"

"No — no, I came home with her. Behind her — she didn't know. Wanted to let her do the whole thing alone. I confess I was curious."

"Curious! After hunting hours and hours —"

"'Curious-after-hunting-hours-and hours,'" he intoned. She could hear him getting ready to laugh. "The moment I caught sight of the little imp, I forgot I was tired. Whatever she's been up to, it's something interesting. May I wait and hear her tell about it?"

"Of course you may! I should think you'd earned admittance." Miss Theodosia was sizzling gently with perfectly natural irritation. Now that her baby was safe, she had leisure to be irritated.

"Come and rest in the easiest chair you can find. When I think —"

"Don't think! Let's just have cups of tea and wait for the show to begin."

"But why aren't you cross? I am."

The man-voice in the dark was soothing.

"Oh, no, you only think you are, dear lady. You are deceiving yourself. Crossness and — er — nerve-itis are two very different diseases (you note I term them both diseases). I speak as One Who Did Once Know."

Miss Theodosia, on her way for cups of tea, paused in her dim doorway.

"Diseases change so. In ten years —"

"In ten years 'nerve-itis' has lost none of its pep — rather annexed more. It may have another name."

"Nerve-itus Dance," murmured the voice in the doorway. "That's it — that's what I was having when you came. I don't think I am quite over the attack yet."

"Three lumps of sugar dissolved in a cup of tea," prescribed the man-voice promptly. "Repeat the dose in five minutes. Never known to fail. As a pre-

ventive of — er — contagion, it is well for any also who have been exposed —"

"I'll have it there in a minute. The kettle's boiling," called Miss Theodosia from interior regions. She came back presently with a tray lit by a tiny flare of candle-light.

"'How far that little candle throws his beams—
So shines a good deed in a naughty world'"

quoted he. "The good deed is the good tea."

"And the naughty world is Evangeline. Won't you have three lumps just this time, to make perfectly sure you don't contract my Nerve-itus Dance?"

"Safety first," he laughed. "Four lumps. This is our first tea-party at 'Candle-lighting Time,' isn't it?"

Now Miss Theodosia laughed. It was easy to laugh with Elly Precious being bedded down instead of lost.

"How you do quote to-night!" she said. "That's the third time, counting 'Safety First,' in the last five minutes."

"Pardon," he craved. "It's because I

feel happy. I'm likely to quote again at any minute."

"Well, quote the Scriptures then to Evangeline when she comes."

"Hark!"

She was coming now. They could hear the light, hurrying steps. Was Evangeline never tired? Did neither parades nor circuses — mysterious wanderings nor mysterious triumphs — affect her?

"The show is about to begin," murmured Miss Theodosia.

It began immediately. Evangeline came bursting in upon them, waving a blue ribbon. She was a fresh and radiant Evangeline.

"Stefana says I can't stay only a minute. Stefana's kind o' mad, but she didn't dass to be, out loud, for fear we'd 'xcite Elly Precious. He's asleep. I was so proud of his arms an' legs when I undressed 'em! They're very high-percented arms 'n' legs. Mercy gracious, yes! Don't you see this ribbon's blue — blue — blue! That's because he's a Best Baby, an' the prize was five

dollars, an' they gave him a dollar 'special,' too, that we're goin' to put in the bank —"

Miss Theodosia held up her hand.

"Begin at the beginning," she commanded. "Where have you been all this time? What on earth have you been doing?"

"Showin' Elly Precious," flashed back Evangeline brightly. "You've heard o' Poultry Shows? Well, this wasn't. This was a Baby Show. We never noticed it was advertised in the p'rade at all — a man with a sandwich on. A lady told me. She said the circus folks were pretty bright, because all o' the world loved babies an' they knew 'twould make a beautiful side show. She said they knew it would draw, an' it did. It drew me an' Elly Precious! The circus folks offered prizes. They weighed an' measured 'em to see which was a Best Baby, an' Elly Precious was! You better be proud that you — that you measled a Best Baby!"

Miss Theodosia's glance met the Man Person's. The show was turning out well.

"I've got to go back, or Stefana — oh, mercy gracious me, it was worth folks bein' mad! There was a nurse there an' a lovely lady an' a doctor. They let me stay Elly Precious's nap out, because it isn't a sleep go-cart. He has to sit up straight in it. The lady said to lie him down there an' let him sleep. But we didn't expect he'd sleep so long — the lady went away, but I stayed. I wasn't goin' to wake a Best Baby up out o' a sound sleep! It made us a little late gettin' home."

"Yes, go on," murmured the Man Person feelingly.

"Why, that's as far as there is to go. Then we came home."

"Why didn't you go back and tell Stefana or Miss Theodosia? Where was your Baby Show, anyway?"

"In a tent. I happened to get a peek in an' saw folks with babies, an' I was a folks with one, so I just went in. That's all. I was goin' to tell Stefana, but he cried an' I couldn't leave him. He wouldn't have took a prize, cryin'. I had to keep dancin'

to him — mercy gracious! But it was worth it. Then when he'd got all measured an' weighed, — it's pretty wearin' work, — he went to sleep. I told you that. I had to wait for him to wake up." For the first time Evangeline was on the defensive; she read the faint disapproval in Miss Theodosia's face.

"Mercy gracious, I never s'posed you'd go an' worry! I thought — I thought you'd jus' be pur-roud." Actually, Evangeline was crying now. Miss Theodosia's disapproval vanished instantly. With a sweep of her arms, she gathered a forgiven Evangeline in. The Man Person stood outside the little zone of feminine emotion, but he had his own brand.

"We *are* pur-roud," Miss Theodosia crooned over the subdued little figure. "It's perfectly splendid about the blue ribbon and the prize!"

"An' the special."

"An' the special. Think of what his mother will say! But I knew he was the Best Baby all the time; it was written in

between every little measle!" And saving laughter righted the situation; Evangeline bounded back to her usual spirits. "Now," Miss Theodosia said, "I'll get you some preserved ginger and shoo you home! You mustn't stay another minute, or Stefana will surely be over here with a policeman."

"Stefana's proud, too — she needn't pretend! I saw her kissin' Elly Precious's knee. But she'll scold; she thinks it's her duty. Mercy gracious, when Aunt Sarah knits an' Mother's back, I hope Stefana'll grow down again."

The Man Person poised his teacup above the saucer, arrested by this new puzzle.

"Er — grow how?"

"Down. She's so terrible grown-up now. It's been pretty wearin' on my nerves. We use' to play dolls together. We don't ever now. She's too starched up."

"Poor Stefana with her starch!" murmured Miss Theodosia. The poor little martyr to starch! It was to be hoped, indeed, that when Aunt Sarah knit, Stefana could grow down again and play dolls.

"Do you know her mother — Evangeline's?" Miss Theodosia asked, after the child had gone. "Is Evangeline like her; — is that where she gets her Evangelineness?"

"No, she must get it from the father. The mother is exactly like Stefana, or may be I've got it the wrong end to. I never saw the father; he died a few weeks before the baby was born."

"Well, the father must have been remarkable; somebody is responsible for Evangeline. I love that child next to — my baby. Supposing — I think of it sometimes — supposing I had staid in Rome or Paris or Farthest Anyplace — not come home at all, you know, — then I should have missed it all. I should never have known those children."

"Nor me," he ventured. She did not appear to hear, but went on musingly:

"Something sent me home — I needed those children."

"And me!"

"I was going on a fast train — a through express — straight to Lonesome Land!"

She laughed softly as if she were alone. "If Evangeline hadn't Flagged my train — it was Evangeline! She switched me off on another track." Miss Theodosia's tender eyes lifted and met the Man Person's with a little start of recognition as if saying: "Why, are you here!" But she met those other eyes staunchly. "I'm glad I stopped off at this Flagg station. I like it here."

For a little the big room, bright with lamplight, was so still that the clock ticked impertinently. Miss Theodosia's tea cooled in its cup, and John Bradford had long ago forgotten his. The big hands on the chair-arms gripped them unconsciously. Then, suddenly, the man got to his feet and walked to the far end of the room. On his return he stopped before Miss Theodosia, looking down.

"I love you," John Bradford said. The impertinent clock kept on, but Miss Theodosia could not hear it now for the ticking of her heart. Was she a frightened girl that she could not lift her eyes?

"I was on that express, too — bound for

that same place. I thank the Lord I got off here. I shall always thank Him, whether you can love me or not. I shall always love you. If you thought, sometime — I can wait —"

Miss Theodosia's eyes lifted. But she shook her head.

"I'm afraid not — sometime."

He still stood, looking down. Very gently he touched her hair; she could hear the long breath he drew.

"I was afraid so. It was too much to ask. But I had to take my chance. Don't be distressed, dear. I am happy, loving you. You can't deny me that! I've loved you ever since I found you mending my shirt. I have had a beautiful time loving you, and it will keep right on. But I was crazy, wasn't I, to think — of course you 'couldn't sometime.'"

"Because I love you now," she said steadily. "I have — I have just found it out!"

The gently stroking hand ceased its work. John Bradford caught the sweet

face between his great palms and turned it upward to his.

"Dear!" he cried. He was a boy, she a girl. Love has no age. It swept over them, a young sweet tide. This man — this woman. There was no one else in the world then.

"Dear!" she whispered, matching her love-word to his, "and I never knew till a minute ago!"

"I always knew. The shirt had no part in it! I have loved you since the world began and the morning stars sang! You were made for me to love; all these years I have been waiting for you, dear."

"All these years!" she repeated a little sadly — "that reminds us. But we are not old! I won't be — I won't have you be! What is time, anyway?"

"Nothing!" He blew it away in a whiff of scorn. "What is anything but that I love you and you love me? We are just born now — this is our birthday! May I kiss you on your birthday, dear? Will you kiss me on mine?"

The clock must have stopped in very astonishment at this scandal of grown love playing young love. At any rate, there was only the sound of the young love in the room. The room sang with the beautiful sound of it.

It seemed a very long time afterward that John Bradford asked his man-question: "When?"

"When your book is written — the love story. Not till then."

"It's getting on beautifully!" he pleaded. "It never will be done. There's going to be no end to the chapters."

"Mercy gracious! Where are you now?"

"The heroine has just said yes. The hero has just kissed her — he is just going to kiss her ag —"

"Mercy — mercy gracious!" Miss Theodosia's fair cheeks flooded pink. She held up a staying hand.

"Wait — till I get — get used to being a heroine! Am I? Was *that* the love story?"

"That was the love story. I have been working on it every day. Some days I had

set-backs — when the heroine flung things in my face about reformed doctors, and times like that."

"She took them back again, those things. She was a kind sort of a heroine."

"She was a dear. He wanted to kiss her when she took them back, those things. I had all I could do to keep him from it. He was a tough sort of a hero to work with. I had my hands full."

"Did you love — did the hero love the heroine when they sat drinking cups of tea?"

"A little harder every cup."

"When they nursed the measles?"

"A little more every measle."

"When they went to the circus?" She drew a long, happy breath. "I like to have been that heroine! Dear, is it right to be as happy as this? For old folks, I mean — near-olds? Oughtn't we to knock on wood? Oh, I've just thought of Evangeline. What will Evangeline say?"

"Something Evangelical," he laughed. "I hope I'll be there."

CHAPTER VIII

EVANGELINE had excitements of her own. As though prizes for Best Babies were not enough, a new excitement began the very next day. Two excitements — one on the lovely heels of the other. Evangeline, gasping in the joyous throes of the first-comer, raced over to Miss Theodosia, as she had learned to race with troubles as well as joys. All the way she emitted sounds approximating steam-whistles. The very nature of the news she was carrying suggested the sounds she made carrying it.

"The elegantest thing has happened — I mean's goin' to!" She could not wait to get quite there, but sent her news ahead of her through the transmitting medium of air. Miss Theodosia, on her porch, sat dreaming her love's young dream — young, not old; not old!

"The elegant elegantest! He's goin' to

be cured! He won't be deaf o' hearin' any more! I mean he thinks he won't — I mean *he* —"

"Sit down on the step, dear. Count ten, then start again."

"Onetwothreefour — oh, I can't wait to get to ten! If your little brother had always been deaf o' hearin' an' a doctor looked into him with a spy-glass an' said I think this boy can be cured, I'm goin' to take him to a hospital an' have him operated when his mother is willin' if she gets home — I mean if she gets home when she's willin' — oh, I mean —"

"Yes, dear. Sit still. I understand, and I think she will be willing when she gets home, don't you? Oh, Evangeline, won't we all be happy to have Carruthers cured of his poor little deafness o' hearing! I know the doctor, and he knows ears! We'll trust him, Evangeline. He will do everything in the world there is to be done. And we'll stay at home and pray."

"Pray!" cried Evangeline. Her little thin face lifted to the blue heavens. "I've

woke up right slap in the middle o' nights an' prayed: 'Oh, Lord, that made a little children an' forgot his ears, do somethin' now — don't you think you'd ought to, O Lord? It don't seem fair not to. He ain't ever heard Elly Precious crow, nor laugh — think o' that, dear Lord.'" The shrill voice dropped suddenly. "But He never." Evangeline sighed.

"Till now, dear — we hope He will now. He and the doctor who knows ears. I thought you were so pleased and that you were —"

"Oh, yes'm, oh, I am! It was just — I was thinkin' how lovely Elly Precious's laugh sounds an' Carruthers not ever hearin' it. So far, I mean." Evangeline caught her courage again in both hands. "But he'll laugh 'nough more times when he can hear — I mean when Carruthers can. Won't it be puffectly elegant!"

It was later in the same day when the second excitement struck the little House of Flaggs. Evangeline raced again across the separating green grass to Miss Theo-

dosia. This time she went at reduced speed because she had Elly Precious over her shoulder. Miss Theodosia saw them coming and smiled.

"More news! I know it is puffectly elegant by Evangeline's face. Well, Evangeline?"

"Mercy gracious! Take him before I spill him! I'm so happy I joggle. She's knittin' an' she's comin' home! I mean knittin' *enough*. She said 'my-dear-children-I-expect-to-be-home-to-morrow-Aunt-Sarah-is-better-an'-I-can't wait-to-see-you-your-mother—' Mercy gracious, when Stefana got to your mother, seemed as if I'd burst! We hollered it to Carruthers, an' he burst! An' Elly Precious knows she's comin', I know he knows. Tickle him an' see how pleased he is!" Without comma or semicolon, to say nothing of periods, Evangeline panted on. Out of breath at last, her voice sat down an instant, as it were, to rest. It was up again in a moment.

"To-morrow is most to-day! It'll be

to-day to-morrow! Oh, mercy gracious me! We're goin' to sweep under everything an' behind — every las' thing, under 'n' behind. She won't find a grain o' dust. An' Stefana's makin' starch."

"Mercy gracious!" softly ejaculated Miss Theodosia.

"I mean to eat in the dessert — corn-starch. We've begun to skim Elly Precious's bottles. You can eat thin bottles, can't you, darlin' dear, when Mother's comin' home? Corn-starch has to have cream on it — when Mother's comin' home!" She laughed joyously. All past and creamless corn-starches were a joke. Laughing at them was easy at this happy moment.

"Isn't it splendid Aunt Sarah went to knittin'? Mercy gracious, I hope she won't — won't drop a stitch for Mother to have to stay an' pick up!" Evangeline's laugh trilled out once more.

"Do you suppose you'd dass to cut Elly Precious's hair, Miss Theodosia, while I danced like everything an' made faces?

Dutchy, you know, in the back o' his neck —he's straggly now. I'd make awful faces — "

"I wouldn't 'dass,' dear," smiled Miss Theodosia. "I never could cut fast enough and you never could dance hard enough — we'd hurt him."

"Well, she'll look at the front o' him first — never mind. We're goin' to put on that darlin' little ni'gown you made, for a dress — belt it in, you know, with a ribbon off the handle o' the clo'es-basket; Stefana's ironed it out. An' we're goin' to pin on his blue ribbon prize."

John Bradford came that evening to sit on the porch in the soft warmth that autumn had borrowed from summers-to-come, with promissory note to pay it back when lovers were through with it. Miss Theodosia met him with the news.

"Mustn't it be beautiful to be welcomed home like that, dear? If you could have seen Evangeline's little shiny face! And the way Elly Precious laughed — when I tickled him! And, oh, John — Do you hear me

call you John? I thought it would be hard!"

"'And, oh, John —'" he prompted, putting it yet further off by a kiss-length.

"Oh, John, I know about Carruthers. You're going to take him away to cure him."

"To try to cure him," John Bradford said gravely.

"You'll do it, dear — you and the Lord! Evangeline and I are trusting. Hark, she is coming! No one else sounds like that!"

"No one else gallops — canters — breaks speed limits!" he laughed. "Now what? More news?"

The same news over again, but Evangeline saw that which momentarily banished it from her mind. She saw John Bradford standing behind Miss Theodosia's chair; she saw him stoop over it.

"Mercy gracious, he kissed her!" gasped Evangeline. Something told her to turn and gallop back, but she could not stop in time. She was already at the foot of the steps. Awful embarrassment seized her —

seized Evangeline! In the faint, reflected lamplight from within the house she could see the two above her looking down. Mercy gracious!

"Sit down, Evangeline."

"I'm s-sittin'—I *think* I'm sittin' down." Up-standings and down-sittings were confused in the general dizziness of things. Perhaps she was standing up.

"You're not sick, are you, Evangeline? You're not saying anything."

Then Evangeline said something.

"I — I saw him — doin' it, I mean. Mercy gracious, *what'll I do?*" For some inherited delicacy of instinct made of her a dreadful intruder; she saw herself in the shameful act. Instinctively Evangeline knew she was on sacred ground.

"I couldn't stop, I was goin' so fast. It's too late not to see him doin' it; I don't know what to do."

With swift, light steps Miss Theodosia was down beside her. John Bradford with one step was there. Evangeline looked shamefacedly up into their two kind faces.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. For answer, John Bradford took one of Miss Theodosia's hands and laid it on hers. He held out one of his own.

"May I have this lady to be my wedded wife, Evangeline? Will you give her to me?" His big voice was very tender. Evangeline looked into his shining eyes. The mystery of love swept through her small, sweet soul. She shut her eyes as if from some light too bright for them. If she were alone, she would say her prayers. But the tender voice was going on.

"May I have her, Evangeline — will you put her hand in mine? She is very dear, indeed, to me." She could feel Miss Theodosia's soft hand quiver against her own hard little palm. Miss Theodosia's eyes were tender, too.

Then, suddenly, inspiration came to her. She laid the soft hand in the big hand and looked up, smiling into John Bradford's face.

"I'm willin'," she said, "if you'll honor an' obey."

It was as if a silken gown enfolded Evangeline's straight little shoulders and they heard her say: "I pronounce thee." The strange little ceremony left them hushed.

No one spoke again for a little space. Somewhere sleepy birds twittered, disturbed by rustling leaves or stealthy marauders. Somewhere a clock intoned distantly. A train far away rushed through the night, perhaps to some Lonesome Land, but they were not on it. Then John Bradford broke the spell. He leaned down and kissed Evangeline.

A little laugh bubbled up to him. "You must've made a mistake. I'm the wrong one — mercy gracious!"

THE END

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